

STAR WARS

(Main Theme)

Fly now, go to the stars
and look to tomorrow
when we'll be free.
Hear our words and be heartened:
we will soon triumph
and homeward be.

The slaves of fear would try
to bind us in terror's chains,
as the mighty fleets and armies hunt us.
But so long as we can hold
our trust in our victory's aim,
we can stand the test of strength and rise again.

Now the moment has come
for daughters and sons
of truth to be strong.
We must show that we can
stand firm and join hands
to fight evil's wrong.

We have no master
sending us to his errand's fall,
we have only our own wills to guide us.
So we know that when we're done
the galaxy's rule will call
and return the word of law to one and all.

Pilots, ready to fly,
to win or die,
the Force will decide.
Rebel armies so young,
with conviction so strong
we can turn the tide.

The day will come again
when honor and peace will thrive,
when tyranny will be forgotten.
The Force of light will hold
the darkness at bay and fight
so the freemen's dream of truth be kept alive.

The Force will be with you
as you fly onward.

Lyrics by Fern Marder
(to music by John Williams)

TIME WARP 6/7

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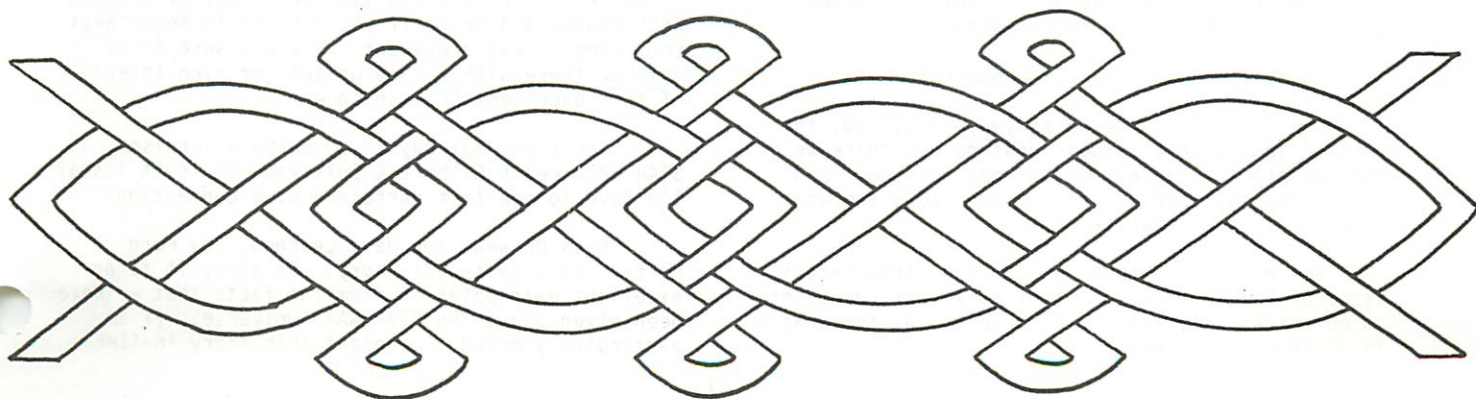
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WARP TIME

Welcome to the latest issue of TIME WARP. Although this issue was a long time in coming, I think you'll agree that the contents--not to mention the size, more than twice as many pages as any past issue of TIME WARP--more than make up for the delays in production.

This issue of TIME WARP would, even now, not be in your hands were it not for the efforts of several very special people.

First, I would like to thank Carol Walske and Fern Marder, who--time and again--came to the aid of this fanzine. Typing, calligraphy of titles, incidental artwork--not to mention magnificent major artwork, such as that which graces several stories in this issue as well as the front and back covers for both volumes--layout, etc.: no job was too difficult, too menial, too unheard-of for these wonderful people. What can I say but, "Thank you, my very dear friends!"

Another thank-you must go to Atlantic Blueprint, 575 Madison Avenue, New York. When it became obvious that there just wasn't enough time left to mimeograph TIME WARP before Media*West Con, it only became feasible to print the zine at all because of the prompt, reasonably priced service available at this professional printing shop. (Not only that, but Steve, one of the owners, is a 'closet fan' who thinks fanzines are the greatest idea since sliced bread, and who gives fanzines TLC of a personal nature. Nice, huh?) TIME WARP would not exist without Atlantic Blueprint, and I owe everyone connected with the shop a big vote of thanks.

Thanks are also extended to Devra Langsam, whose POISON PEN PRESS will be marketing this issue of TIME WARP. It's a tough, thankless job, but somebody's gotta do it, else people will never get their orders. Thanks to Devra, we know that all mail-orders for TIME WARP 6/7 will be sent out promptly.

I wish to also extend my thanks to all the wonderful artists and authors whose works appear in this issue. Last-minute deadlines, impossible turnaround time: the obstacles in their paths were at times seemingly insurmountable. Yet time after time, these obstacles were defeated.

Thank you. You are all wonderful.

And a final thank-you to you. Yes, you, the person reading this issue. What do you think we go through all this agony for, if not for you? And your comments, your critiques, your LOCs are what make our work worthwhile.

So once again, thank you. Enjoy this latest issue of TIME WARP, and let us know your reactions to our creativity and our hard work. As for what's in store for you, well...

This volume opens with a magnificent folio of short-shorts, all revolving around a single theme. Each story is different in tone and texture, yet each ends with a short, powerful, stabbing slash right to the gut--or the heart. Three of the best writers in fandom have attacked a major theme--and have brought it to new, powerfully mythic life. To say any more would be to risk revealing the core of these stories. I shall, therefore, say only beware, and read the story folio ("For Dogs to Tear," Pat Nussman; "Hour of the Kiln," Jacqueline Taero; "Heir Presumptive," Carol Walske) at your own risk.

Over the years, the nature of TIME WARP has changed and developed as my own tastes have changed and developed. TIME WARP started out as a STAR TREK zine. After 1977, the scope of the zine broadened to include STAR WARS stories also. I lost some readers, gained some readers, and kept a great many more faithful readers who trusted me to give them good reading, no matter whether the tales were set in the STAR TREK universe or the STAR WARS universe.

Gradually, even this has changed, and I now see TIME WARP as a broad-based, general interest fiction zine with an emphasis on SWARS and TREK. Please note. This does not mean that TIME WARP will feature only STAR WARS and/or STAR TREK fan fiction. Indeed, it does not even mean that TIME WARP will print only media-oriented stories, or that TIME WARP will print only SF-oriented fan fiction. Original fiction (such as Patrick O'Neill's "Hazardman" series) is welcome within these pages, as are non-SF media-oriented stories.

Kate Santovani's "With a Little Help From My Friends" is a perfect case in point. This story is based on a British crime-fighter show called THE PROFESSIONALS. The British show is well written, well acted, beautifully produced, and--as far as I know--has appeared in this country only on LA and Chicago (or was it Detroit?) networks. However, Kate's story is so well written, and so tightly plotted, that it stands on its own as an excellent action-adventure novella. It passes the one test that all too many fan stories fail to pass: it can be read by a non-fan, by someone who has never seen the program it has been derived from. So come, meet Bodie and Doyle, the charismatic heroes of THE PROFESSIONALS--and then, if you make it to Media*West Con, keep an eagle eye out. There's sure to be someone there with a tape or two (or even three!) of this excellent British show.

"The Lost Jedi Boys," by Barbara Tennison, is STAR WARS meets Gilbert & Sullivan--or is it Tosca? I'd love to see this performed at a convention!

"Pass On What You Have Learned," by Fern Marder, is a post-Jedi story. As such, it is an excellent extrapolation from the facts that we have been given about the STAR WARS universe. (I am particularly proud to present this story in TIME

WARP. It is the first fiction story that Fern has written under a single byline. Before this, all of Fern's writing was done in collaboration with Carol Walske. I think that you'll agree that "Pass On What You Have Learned" is a most auspicious beginning to any writing career.)

"Hippocrates' Trust," by Pat Nolan, is a fascinating 'what if--?' story. What if Sarek had died on the way to Babel? What would have been the effect on Spock, McCoy, Amanda--the Federation?

Another 'what if--?' story is presented to us in Liz Sharpe's "Bound for Glory." Liz's 'what if--?' gives us a look at an alternate JEDI tale, one that, given the characters we have grown to love over the years, could all too easily have been real.

Karen Osman's "Loyalties" is part of a special alternate universe which has as its 'jumping-off point' THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK. It provides a fascinating look behind Imperial lines, and adds much to the diversification of interest in this issue of TIME WARP.

"Prologue," by Devra Langsam, is a prequel to A NEW HOPE. Now if we could only talk Devra into writing the novel that this is the prequel to...

"Medicinae," by Vivian Gates, is a post STAR TREK: THE MOTION PICTURE story. I like its view of Christine as a woman who takes her destiny into her own hands--er, that is--uh, yes, as I was saying, though mainline TREK insofar as ST:TMP is concerned, "Medicinae" would appear to be an alternate insofar as WRATH OF KHAN is concerned. Or is it? (Let's see. If Christine is stationed onboard another ship, then...)

Definitely an alternate timeline story is Joyce Yasner's "The Heart of Darkness." It is an alternate telling of RETURN OF THE JEDI, and as such offers one of the most telling character studies of Darth Vader to yet appear in fan fiction.

Sara Campbell's "Two Faces" gives us a unique look at the world of the BLADE RUNNER. Consider most carefully the title of this vignette--and then prepare yourself for an ending that will twist around all your preconceptions of the universe presented to us in that most complex and fascinating movie.

The final story in this volume of TIME WARP 6/7 is "The Homecoming," by Fern Marder and Carol Walske. Again, this is an alternate retelling of the story told to us in RETURN OF THE JEDI. If the story is a little darker, a little more adult than the story told in JEDI (there are no Ewoks in this SWARS universe), that might be because Fern and Carol see their tale as being an alternate based on EMPIRE,

rather than on A NEW HOPE. Fern and Carol hasten to assure us that they love RETURN OF THE JEDI. But if you're a writer, and there are so many fascinating what-ifs left floating around, what can you do?

Added to the above are poems, songs, vignettes, and artwork. All of it is amazing, all of it outstanding.

I thank everyone who contributed in any way to TIME WARP 6/7. Your contributions have made this the best issue yet.

*

sigh I just read over my editorial. It does sound as though I'm puffing off my own horn--or rather, my zine's own horn at times, doesn't it? But honesty, they say, is the best policy. And I really do believe that I've been able to gather together some of the best stories, poems, songs, illos, and cartoons in fandom.

So read, enjoy, and LOC.

*

And while I have the space, a slightly more somber note. This issue of TIME WARP has been a delight and a torment to bring to you. A delight because I am so pleased with the finished product--the quality of the stories and the illos, the overall appearance of the zine, etc.--and a torment because it has been so time-consuming and draining of energy.

I have been so tied up with this zine, I have not written a single story since before the Baltimore World SF Convention. Quite frankly, my dears, I would rather write than edit. And if editing a fanzine is going to take all my spare time (not that there's that much spare time to begin with when I have a job that requires from ten to twenty hours of overtime a week!), then I'm afraid the fanzine must go--at least for the time being.

This is official notification that, until further notice, TIME WARP is on 'hiatus.'

I will not say I'll never do a fanzine again. As Sean Connery learned, never say never. But I do say that it will be at least two or three years before I even consider doing another issue of TIME WARP.

Until then--farewell. And thank you for the pleasant memories I'll carry with me always of our association together.

I love you all. You are what made TIME WARP real.

Anne Elizabeth Zeek



FOR DOGS TO TEAR

PAT NUSSMAN

"Brothers and Sisters, I bid you beware.
Of giving your heart to a dog to tear."
--Rudyard Kipling, "The Power of the Dog"

Luke Skywalker lay awake, his eyes open to let the night leak through their crystal depths. Waiting. At times, he felt he spent his life just waiting. Now he knew what he waited for.

A night.

He built the Force about him, to push back this night. Wait. Wait. There will be another of these nights, blue-black in depth, a scented wind blowing through restless trees. There will be many such.

He caught his breath harshly as the door slid open. A slim, slight figure--like, but unlike--stood at his door.

"No." His voice twisted the word to make it misshapen, untrue.

"Yes." She walked to his bed, clad in diaphanous white, strong and sweet. She sat, placing a cool hand against his forehead. "Yes. Tonight, this night, is ours."

She laid her head down, then her body, sweetly beside him, their cheeks touching chastely, as if in truth they had grown together as brother and sister and knew it in their blood and bones so they never desired one for the other.

Luke wished fervently that it were so, for both of their sakes.

His lips brushed the hollows of her cheek, the space between her two brows, her closed eyes, tasting faint salt that lingered sweetly on his tongue. "A Jedi craves not these things," he said shakily.

A deep shudder shook her slight body. "I know. Oh, dear gods, I know."

His arms slid around her, seeking what he had seen often in dreams. What he had no right to seek. "Only tonight, love. Only tonight."

"Yes." Softly, she drew aside the sheet covering him, pressing a kiss to the hollow where shoulder joined chest. "It isn't fair, not to

Han. If it were only us. . ."

"No." He used his lips to stop her words. After a moment, he drew an unsteady breath. "No, you know this isn't right. Oh, gods, gods. . ."

Then there was no more of talking. And yet, the room was far from silent.

Later, a deeper silence reigned. Once again, Luke lay alone, with only her perfume on the sheets as his company.

This, then, comprised his punishment. Somehow, he had known that all along.

And known more. Restlessly, he threw back the sheets and strode to the window, throwing aside the drapery to let the light of three moons silver the length of his form. Shadows lingered in the ancient courtyard, with blurred shapes that none but he, last and first of the Jedi, could put form to.

"Are you so desperate, then?" The question fell bitterly from his lips. "To use Jedi mind trickery on one of your own kind?" His hand formed a fist on the broken stone of the sill. All his life they had tried to use and manipulate him. This time they had succeeded all too well.

And they had formed their Messiah better than they knew. For he alone foresaw the ending, where the twisting, turning lines of the Force converged from what had begun this night.

With a quick gesture, he threw back the panels of the window, as if to join the ghosts where they stood--unmoving, unheeding of his mental pleas. "You don't know, do you?"

The shadows stood silent, the gnarled shrubbery standing stark against the blue-black sky.

No, he thought sadly. They didn't know. That they had destroyed all his work in a single night.

Stricken, Leia had known only that she had

conceived this night, planted a seed in a womb which all her nights with Han had left barren. Triumphant, the Jedi knew only that a Force-sensitive son would follow--the greatest Force-sensitive ever born, worthy son of such a mother and father.

He laughed, thinking of his own past. **Worthy indeed!** The thought was tinged with bitterness.

In pity, he could tell Leia no more. In agony, he would tell the Jedi nothing.

It was done, now.

Slowly, like an old man, he returned to his bed, to dream restlessly among the perfumed sheets.

To dream of his death. At his son's hands.



HOUR OF THE KILT

JACQUELINE TAERO

Out of the universal substance, as out of wax, Nature fashions a colt, then breaks him up and uses the material to form a tree, and after that a man, and next some other thing; and not one of these endures more than a brief span. As for the vessel itself, it is no greater hardship to be taken to pieces than to be put together.

--Marcus Aurelius, Meditations

"But--but that's not possible!"

Luke Skywalker looked sadly at the woman who was his wife, and then, unable to bear the sight of her delicate, disbelieving features, glanced away. Of all the sacrifices he had been called upon to make, this was the most difficult. . . to tear away a part of himself and ask the same of her.

"I don't believe it," she said firmly.

"It's true," he said over the catch in his throat. Her agitated footsteps sounded lightly on the floor. Closing his eyes, he saw her skirts swirling about her feet as she paced back and forth, her face set in determined rejection, her slender fingers clenched at her sides.

And he felt, all too strongly, the growing fear of her first belief.

"Who knows?" she demanded.

"No one," he admitted in a whisper. He could read her like a transparency; he knew what she would suggest and knew, too, that he must reject it.

"And no one needs to know," she said calmly, fulfilling his foresight.

"No," Luke said quietly. "No, Leia."

"But why?" she pleaded. He turned then, looking her full in the face, bracing himself against the tears he would see in her eyes.

"We can't go on. . . not as--" He paused, summoning the strength he would need to resist her. "You're my sister, Leia." He swallowed hard, seeking the calm of the Force. "If we'd known. . ."

"But we didn't!" Her brown eyes snapped with anger and fear. "And what if it's not true? There's no proof!"

"The Force. . ." Luke hesitated. Scenes flashed through his mind, terrible visions of how it had come to be. . . their mother as a young woman. . . their father. . . "Leia, believe me--"

Some of it must have reached her; her face had gone pale.

With an effort, he conquered his own ravaging pain, in love and pity offering her the only consolation he could see.

"You don't have to be alone. Han loves you--"

"But I don't love him!"

Unspoken, the next words echoed in his head as clearly as if she had spoken them: **I love you.**

"Maybe in time. . ." Luke's voice faltered, every instinct rejecting what he knew had to come. If only Leia had turned to Han in the first place, all those years ago. . .

"So that's it?" Leia demanded icily. "Just forget we ever existed? Go crawl into Han's bed

like every other cheap tramp that ever laid eyes on him?"

"He loves you, Leia," Luke said quietly. "How he chooses to forget you is his business."

"Well, you can forget it! And so can he!" She drew herself up to her full diminutive height, glaring at him regally.

"Leia. . ."

But the woman who stood before him was not Leia. As though she had suddenly donned invisible court robes, every centimeter of her being was Princess Organa of Alderaan, imperious and unreachable.

"Get out," she directed coldly.

And because he knew it was the only way, he said nothing and showed her none of his own anguish, lest he fuel the tiny flame of unfillable hope that still burned deep in the core of her spirit.

Leaden footsteps took him to the door and he knew that when it closed behind him, it would close forever. He heard the swish, and the seal, and the faint click of the lock and then he was alone in the cold, empty hall.

Many hours later, when she had ceased being sick, her tears and anger both spent, Leia Organa--for she was, again, only an Organa--sat in a silent, empty chamber and considered the unwanted future.

She would go away--she had known that from the first hint of Luke's rejection. It only remained to determine where--and with whom.

One companion, of course, was already decided. A wan smile touched her face, casting warmth into her ashen thoughts. She hadn't told him about the baby. . .and now he had forfeited any right to know. Leia Organa had been born and bred to fight, not to grovel and beg. Never again, even unconsciously, would her thoughts reach out to twine with his; his rejection of her might be only physical, but hers of him would be total and forever. And the life of her child, only days past conception, would never be touched by Luke Skywalker in any way.

Yes, she would go away. . . The thought was accompanied by a straightening of her shoulders, a proud lifting of her chin. And perhaps Luke was right, after all.

There was always Han.



HER PRESUMPTIVE

CAROL WALSKE

They clung to each other in silence, Leia hiding her face against Han's chest and taking comfort in the strength of his arms. They created a magical, protective shield around her, one she was loath to break. But her troubles remained, insoluble, mind-twisting, tormenting.

After a while she looked up, smiled convincingly, and asked Han once again if he would leave her alone for a little while. This time, he acquiesced. He turned and walked back to the Ewok chief's hut, and she moved off along the tree-bridge toward seclusion and a hoped-for interval of peace.

After only a few paces, she hesitated and looked back, but the tall Corellian had already gone back inside, to warmth, light, and company. She glanced around. Luke had long since disappeared, following his own tortuous destiny. She was alone. Poised three hundred feet in the air on a precarious span of rope and branches, surrounded by giants of trees on yet another alien world.

' . . .He is my father. . . '

Luke's father and hers as well. Vader's children. Why wasn't she more surprised to hear that? Did the Sith Lord know? Had his and her meetings--once, fleetingly, on Senate business, then on the Death Star, and latest on Bespin--been ordained, calculated?

She could still hear the Dark Lord whispering, the deep voice and the harsh breath soothed to a hypnotic murmur, cajoling, compelling, insisting. Those had been the darkest, those days alone in the Death Star's cold cell. The memories of the torture were thankfully dim now. . . yet she was conscious of his presence still. It had found its way even to the innermost secret places of her soul, there to wait and watch.

She had been his prisoner once more, on Bespin. She had thought him only interested in Luke, but she had found otherwise. He had wanted to deal with her first. Get the Corellian out of the way--freeze him and give him to a bounty

hunter only too eager to disappear with his prize --then turn to the princess. She had been destined for incarceration on the Sith Lord's own command ship. Only rescue unlooked-for had saved her from that.

But Vader had spared a few hours for her on Bespin. Her cell had come equipped with a view-screen focused on Han's cell, so she could witness and hear his torment. The Dark Lord had intruded, bringing with him a presence so evil and a power in the Force so fell that she had succumbed after a few whispered words.

'...If I don't make it back, you're the only hope of the Alliance... You have that power too. The Force is strong in my family...'

Luke's gentle words echoed in her head. She and Luke and Vader, a family of Jedi, born to power, heirs to the legacy of the Force. Vader had gone to the Dark; Luke was still finding his own path, but it was clearly in the Light. And she? Where was she, in the Force?

She shivered in the chill night air and moved on slowly. She knew where she belonged in the Force. She was her father's daughter, wasn't she? Strong, willful, dedicated, proud, cold... Although her soul cried out, proclaiming its identity and independence, she felt that she was Vader's. Though she did not know what he might have implanted there, twice now he had mastered her mind and will.

She longed to flee, to run until she found someplace where what was inside her couldn't matter anymore. She wanted to hide, so that destiny couldn't touch her. But where could she go? The future would inexorably become the present, bringing with it change and new life.

New life. How had it happened? It had seemed inescapable, inevitable, even right at the time, but now the logic and cause leading up to the event were totally lacking. She had been lonely, missing Han, disoriented and feeling out of the stream of action and decision which had formed the backbone of her life. Luke had been lonely, and full of a nameless fear which shone occasionally in his eyes but which he would not share. Common emotions had brought them together; fear had made them intimate.

Almost unconsciously her right hand trailed down her stomach to her abdomen, smoothing the dress. Two Ewoks came out of a nearby hut and she shrank back, but there was nowhere to hide. They went past her, merely pausing to chatter at her meaninglessly and touch her gently. The creatures loved to touch. As they continued along the catwalk she noticed the two baby Ewoks perched on the shoulders of one of the adults, and the sight made her want to weep. New life, careless and joyful.

What would she do when the new life started to show in her? She shied away from telling anyone the truth. Could she convince Han that it was his, conceived in that one, wonderful loving encounter after the battle with Jabba and the escape from Tatooine? Gods, how she had wanted him then...to affirm her love for him, their survival...their bond.

But not even for Han--or for Luke--would she refuse the child its chance for existence. She felt helpless, trapped by her already fierce, possessive love for the unborn life. She knew it should not be born...not given its heritage. But she could have a med-droid check its genetic structure and assure her of its health, couldn't she? What would be so wrong in bearing the child? It had been conceived in innocence and love. What could be the harm to anyone?

She was hiding in rationalization, she knew. Though she sensed but little of the the Light and Dark balance of the Force, or of the web of fate surrounding her and the child, dimly she was aware that this deed could have naught but evil consequences. She was suddenly sure that the Dark Lord of the Sith would have approved, had he known. Or did he know? A shock of terror chilled her blood. Had she been manipulated into this? Was Vader's soul so abased, so corrupt, that he would interbreed his own offspring to achieve some unfathomable combination of genes and dark Forcery? No. It was impossible. He could not have forced her into what had been, come what may, an act of love.

Love would win out. No one, especially the child, need ever know the full truth. Ignorance would do as well as innocence, and a joyful nurturing would ensure her child's future good.

Besides, she did not care what currents in the Force had led to this. The life was hers, and she wanted it to come to fruition. Nothing would stand in the way of that. She laid her hands over her abdomen protectively, all her doubts settled.

The child would be male. And his name would be Mordred.*



WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS

KATE SANTOVANI

Anybody with any sense will tell you that you don't go walking through Soho at eleven o'clock at night. So what was I doing? Walking through Soho at eleven p.m. on a Friday night, on my way back to the apartment I shared with my English boyfriend of three months--two and a half, actually--and all because we'd had an emergency at St. Christopher's, an 'alleged' terrorist bombing, and we got the victims, and Sister Alleyn let me out an hour early for good behavior.

I turned down the shortcut street. It was dark, of course, and semi-deserted--if you count rats and stray kittens--and I moved briskly along in my uniform, not looking to right nor left.

The two of them came up on me out of the shadows, from either side. One blocked my path. He was dark-haired, hard-faced, good-looking if you like the type, and definite obstruction. He and the ugly big gun he was carrying. The one who was blocking my path to the street proper was about as tall, curly-haired and fair, and just as attractive--if any man can be really attractive while holding a gun, Warren Beatty to the contrary.

Naturally, I stopped. The guns, and the dark-haired one's quiet, "Just a minute, miss, you're under arrest," stopped me short.

"I'm what? What are you talking about? What have I done?"

Their unpleasant expressions hardened even further, and I backed up a step or two. Maybe they weren't cops at all. I held out my purse. "Look, I haven't got but about five pounds and a few pence, but go ahead and take it."

Dark Hair said, "That's easy. What else is in there?"

"What?" said I, with monumental wit and intelligence.

Curly said, "Empty it for us, luv. Slowly."

I started to dump it, and Dark Hair interrupted, saying I was to take out one thing at a time

and put it on the ground at my feet. Totally bewildered, I emptied my purse. I wasn't carrying all that much: my sunglasses, a Cherryh novel, my wallet and passport, lipstick and compact, my St. Christopher's name badge, and an extra pair of panties and pantyhose. When St.'s is shorthanded, I help out on floor. It looks good on my internship record.

Curly picked up my passport and thumbed through it. "Looks real, Bodie."

"What do you mean, it looks real?" Now I felt indignant. "Of course it's real, you jerk, what else did you think? Are you two really cops, or is this some kind of put-on?"

Curly looked at me. Sweat started to seep down my back. After a second, he pulled a thin black leather folder out of his back pocket and, holding it open, pushed it into my face. 'Raymond Doyle, CI5.' It looked official. "Cops," he said, "is as good a term as any."

Dark Hair snorted, and said, "Not exactly." He looked at the other man and said, "You sure, Doyle?"

Curly sifted through the pages again and said, "It's a good clear photo. Doesn't look glued in a-t-f."

"What the hell is this? Will you two tell me what is going on?" But neither one of them was paying much attention to my questions or my indignation, and I could feel panic creeping up my back.

Now Dark hair looked at me, and I wished I could crawl into the wall to get away from that look. "Just pick up your things and put 'em back in your bag, and kick it over here, luv."

"My sunglasses are in there. Can't I hand it to you?"

"Just nudge it over," he said, obdurate, bringing the gun a little more to bear on me.

I knelt down, stuffed things back in, and stood, 'nudging' it over with my toe. Dark Hair

poked through it with the barrel of his gun before picking it up gingerly.

"For crying out loud," I said, "you'd think it was a bomb or something!"

Both of the guns focused on me again, and now I was terrified. I put my hands up. London is not cold in July, but I was shaking.

Curly passed my US passport over to Talldark-andnasty, who studied it for a minute or so and then looked at me again. "Your name is Rachel Ann McGregor?"

It was on the tip of my tongue to say, 'No, my name is Arthur Dent,' but I thought better of it and said, "Yes."

"Where do you work?"

"St. Christopher's Infirmary. I'm a health education intern."

"You get blood on your clothes routinely?"

Blood-- I remembered the numbers of frightened people, wounded, lost, traumatized. "I got my nursing degree before I came to England. I took the British nursing exams then. I helped out in Emergency today."

"Who's your super?"

"My what? Oh, my supervisor. Sister Alleyn. Diana Alleyn."

"What department?"

"Third floor. Education department."

"Where were you between five and seven this evening?"

"Taking venereal disease case histories."

"Anyone who can vouch for that?"

I said patiently, as if to a child, "My supervisor, Sister Alleyn. She was with me all night, until I went down to Emergency. I'm an intern. I'm still in training." This had to be some kind of joke. Cops in London don't carry guns. "Look, what is all this about?"

Talldarkandnasty said, "We'll ask the questions, Miss. You know a Paul Wolfgang?"

"Yes. He's my--" Oh, dear. How could I describe Paul? "--Boyfriend."

"What does your--boyfriend--do?"

"He's a civil servant. He works in the government." The sweat started again, because he was shaking his head at me, with a sardonic smile twisting his mouth. The other twin, Doyle, simply looked--pitiful. "He told me; he's a civil servant."

"Your boyfriend," Talldarkandnasty said, "blows up buildings for a living. And not with government sanction. Doesn't sound too civil to me. He blew

one up tonight, in fact, a department store. Fourteen people--"

"--Were killed," I said faintly. "Ten injured; we lost four of those in pre-op. We got the casualties; my supervisor sent me down to Emergency to help out. There was a little girl, she couldn't have been more than seven--"

She died. In spite of doctors and modern medicine and plain prayer. I tried to imagine Paul--who-brought-me-roses setting up a bomb--he didn't even like to get his hands in dirt. "There must be a mistake."

Curly said, "No mistake. He's wanted in Paris. And Madrid. And Tel Aviv. And Joppa."

I shook my head.

"Do you know him by any other name?"

"Any other name?" I sounded like a parrot.

They were both watching me, like they wanted to pounce. Curly went on, "Paul Desmond? Wulfred von Pfeiffer? Piedro Rodriguez--odd, that one--Shean O'Reilly? Eivend Andurrsen?"

I went right on shaking my head, and my stomach curled over, telling me that this wasn't any joke, that Paul--who-had-picked-me-up-at-a-London-science-fiction-con was really what they said.

Dark Hair added, "Shean O'Reilly is wanted on a murder charge out of New York."

"I think I'm going to be sick." Not original, but true.

Curly came over to me and tipped my chin up with his fingers. He had nice eyes. "You didn't know about any of this, did you?"

I shook my head again, numbly.

He nodded, and he sounded kinder suddenly. "He won't arrest you. But we've got a long story to tell you, and you'd better come with us. You may not be able to go back to him anyway--will he wonder if you don't come straight home?"

"I got off an hour early-- Usually I work over, we're shorthanded. He's--he's always awake when I come in, just just asks if it's me, and--"

"Anyone at work who'd tell him you were there if he got suspicious and called to check up on you?"

"They'd put him through to Sister, and she'd tell him I was there, if there was a reason..." I caught my breath and heard myself say, "Sister doesn't like Paul. She said he was smooth--"

There was a snort from Talldarkandnasty, and Curly motioned at him. "Is Sister Alleyn still there?"

"We had the emergency," I repeated. "She'll be there for hours yet. She said I was worn out and I wouldn't be any more good."

Talldarkandnasty nodded. He and Curly escorted me to a little yellow car and put me in the back

seat. Talldarkandnasty got in beside me and Curly drove.

I felt sick. I wished to God I was home in Bay City.

They escorted me out of the car and into a good-sized grey stone building somewhere around Whitehall. It was just a grey stone building like all the other grey stone buildings around Whitehall.

The office they took me to was neat and plainly furnished, and the man sitting behind the desk looked like nothing more than your average English businessman. Talldarkandnasty gave the gentleman my passport, and said, "Here she is, Mr. Cowley."

Cowley glanced through my passport, then up at me, and then room's temperature dropped ten degrees or so. "You've given us a bit of trouble, Miss McGregor."

I felt like I'd gone down the rabbit hole. What I said, stupidly, was "I don't think I'm in Kansas anymore."

To my surprise, Mr. Cowley smiled and said, "Is your name Dorothy Gale, then?"

I blushed, and shook my head, and told him, "No, sir, it's Rachel McGregor. It's there on the passport."

Again the smile. He had a Scots accent that made me think of Edinburgh and Glencoe and David McCallum--from the sublime to the ridiculous or vice-versa. Over my head he said to the pair of them, "We've checked the background, and spoken to her supervisor and her American professors, Mr. Bodie, Mr. Doyle. She is indeed Rachel Ann McGregor." Looking back down at me, he went on in the same tone, "I apologize for the inconvenience and the fright we've given you, Miss McGregor, but we've been looking for Wolfgang for quite some time." When he was being charming, his voice burred into something so warm and heathery it made my toes curl. Looking over me again, he added, "I hope we haven't placed you in any danger--" To my further amazement, I heard them both shuffle. "I suppose," said Mr. Cowley, "Neither of the gentlemen introduced himself." He motioned them around and introduced Curly as 'Raymond Doyle' and Talldarkandnasty as 'Bodie.'

Doyle smiled at me, and so did Bodie--except that even I could tell Doyle meant it and Bodie was being polite. It felt a little strange after them scaring me to death in the middle of beautiful downtown Soho. But I smiled in turn and tried to relax. Relax, hell.

Mr. Cowley looked serious suddenly, back to business. "And now, Miss McGregor, I have to ask you to make a difficult decision."

Oh, oh. "What? Sir?"

"We can have you escorted to Heathrow and put on an aeroplane to Michigan, with an explanation for your professors. Or, if you want to finish your internship, we can set you up in a new flat away from Wolfgang. Or, if you're willing, you can

pretend nothing has happened and go back to your flat. I admit that I hope you will take the latter course; it would help us out."

Just like Starsky and Hutch. "How does that help you?"

"He won't know that we're on to him." Mr. Cowley looked keenly at me. I suppose I looked rather white. I felt rather white. He opened a drawer and took out a bottle and a glass, poured a generous amount from the former into the latter, and handed me the glass. Luckily, before I drank it like water, the odor warned me, and I sipped it instead. Single-malt Scotch won't burn your throat out the way Jim Beam will, but it comes pretty close. Me, I like Jameson's, so I guess I'm perverted.

"What if he figures out that I'm lying?" I was going to go back and pretend nothing had happened? Me, who flunked Acting 101 in high school?

He nodded at the two others. "Mr. Bodie and Mr. Doyle will be keeping you under surveillance. If something should go wrong, they will be there to assist you."

I must have looked as confused as I felt, because he added, "They will know, don't worry about how," with another one of those smiles. He sounded so confident that I felt a surge of confidence myself.

Such a surge, in fact, that I heard myself saying, "All right, Mr. Cowley, I'll do my best," without really considering what I was getting myself into. He gave me this marvelous, approving look. Me, the little lamb being talked into slaughter.

"Bodie, Doyle," he said, talking over my head again, "if you would escort Miss McGregor back to her flat, I would appreciate it."

"Certainly, Mr. Cowley." That was Doyle. I felt a hand under my elbow, and he helped me to my feet. "We'll keep her under surveillance." To me, he said, with a reassuring smile--very nice, it should have been patented--"You'll be all right. Just don't panic."

"Shouldn't you give me a towel?" I said, and to my surprise, he laughed. Well, it was a BBC show, after all.

Neither one of the men talked much on the way back to the flat, and I was grateful. I was building up my courage, and building up a story. I kept seeing that little girl's face, and all that blood--Nurses aren't morbid, we're just so used to blood and pain that we're prepared. But things can still catch you unaware...

At the flat, Bodie turned around and gave me a smile which was every bit as pretty as Doyle's, though probably less sincere. "Just take it easy, luv. We'll have an eye on you."

I should have smiled back, but I couldn't. I slipped out of the car, wishing I were wearing slacks, and started up to the flat.

I needed time, so I took the stairs. All the way I remembered that little girl, remembered her

crying for her mother.

When I opened the door, Paul's voice came immediately.

"Rae?"

I burst into tears. Paul came out of the bedroom, wearing nothing but a concerned look. I babbled something incoherent at him. He put his arms around me and urged me into the bedroom.

He could have been an athlete, tall, muscled, tanned... When we went boating, he rowed. When we went riding horses, he always got something nearly unmanageable. When we felt crazy and hyperactive, he often picked me up bodily and carried me up four flights of stairs to the flat. And I had noticed, but never really paid attention to it, it was just there, just--Paul. Suddenly I felt as if I might smother in all that muscle. Or be smothered...

He tucked me in, kissed me, said, "Just a moment, sweetheart," and left the bedroom. He came back with a glass of something that smelled distinctly alcoholic.

I pushed it away, and he put it to my mouth firmly.

"Drink it, Rae, it'll help you to sleep."

Finally I drank it, and then he lay down beside me and held me until I fell asleep.

And yet in all that he never let me see his face.

I was up and dressed before Paul the next morning. It was Saturday; he couldn't be expected to pretend to work on a Saturday. With my nerves, I decided to spend the morning baking. Cinnamon rolls. Before I could start, though, the telephone rang, and when I answered, a voice I knew asked for Paul.

I bristled; whoever the hell this Desayna was, I didn't like Paul having a research assistant with a voice like that. He had laughed at me for being jealous, so I didn't bring it up anymore.

But I wouldn't have complained if she'd fallen into the Thames one night.

"Just a minute," I told her, and called for him.

He listened to whoever it was for maybe fifteen seconds and then looked over at me with a peculiar expression; a frightening expression. Then the old charming smile came back, and he made a polite excuse about private calls and taking it in the w.c. My father'd told me about strange little feelings, but I'd never paid much attention until now. I could smell trouble coming.

Before I left Detroit Metro, Mom bought me two locks. One was one of those little things you stick in the side of the door to act as a second lock; the other was a collapsible steel rod that locked into place under a door handle. I blessed my mother fervently.

And then I locked Paul in the bathroom.

If I was wrong, I'd just blown it for Mr. Cowley. I did it anyway. Then I dragged his suitcase out of the closet--and like I'd half-expected, it was way too heavy to be just clothes. I went out the front door at a dead run, and I could hear him swearing and slamming against the bathroom door as I did.

I went tearing around the corner toward the stairs and ran smack into two men. I almost screamed--but Bodie put his hand over my mouth until I recognized him.

"He figured it out," he said.

I nodded. "In the bathroom."

The guns came back out--lordalmighty, could they move fast when they wanted to!--and Doyle pointed me and the suitcase to an area a little closer to the stairs. I went. They paused. Then Bodie looked at Doyle and motioned toward my still-open front door. Doyle nodded. Starsky and Hutch, I swear--they did the 'advance, and advance, and advance' shtick like they meant it, and finally disappeared inside the door. I heard the sound of the bathroom door being kicked open, and then a second click that sounded much closer.

I turned.

Paul was halfway up the staircase with a gun in his hand pointed straight at me. I'd forgotten about the bathroom window, and the easy access to the alley. This time I had no qualms in screaming. Loud.

Two guns went off near-simultaneously, and then a third not more than a fraction of a second behind them. My left arm burned with a bright pain, and there was the stink of smoke and hot metal in the air.

Paul disappeared down the stairs. Bodie disappeared after him. Doyle knelt by me and took my arm in one hand, wrapping a towel around it. "Looks like the bullet went through," he reassured me.

"Good guys always get shot in the arm," I told him. "Why doesn't anyone ever tell you how much 'flesh wounds' hurt?"

"We'll have you to a doctor in a bit," he said. He peered down the stairs, and he looked unhappy. "I almost had him," he whispered.

Just what I needed--guilt. "I was in the way, wasn't I?"

Doyle turned his full attention on me. "Not your fault, luv. Couldn't be helped. Wolfgang's damn good."

I hurt too much to disagree.

Footsteps echoed on the stairs, and Doyle swung the gun around. Bodie hove into view, looking disgusted. Doyle put the gun away.

"Lost 'im," said Bodie. "Got matters straight with the dragon lady downstairs, though--"



Mrs. Garnett was probably foaming at the mouth.

"--and called in the troops." He hunkered down on the floor by me, examining the makeshift bandage. I noticed, and was surprised that in spite of my shock, I noticed, that he still had his black jacket on and it was July. "How's our Yank doing?"

"My name's not Yank," I replied indignantly. He gave me a tolerant grin.

Doyle chuckled. "She'll do for it, but I still want to get her to the surgeon right quick." He cocked an eye at me. "What's in your grip?"

"In my what? Oh, the suitcase. It's not mine. It's his. He kept it locked and shoved to the back of the closet, and so when I shut him in the john--"

Bodie said, "The what?"

"The loo."

"Right. So you locked him in the loo and nicked his grip." The cold slid back into his eyes. "Why'd you do that, luv?"

Suspicion time again. "He got a phone call." This was going to sound lame. "He doesn't get many phone calls. And two words into the conversation, he looked at me as if I'd changed into Dracula's daughter. Handed me some really plausible shit about it being a private call and he'd have to take the phone into the w.c. He's never looked at me like that. Never. So I did what you told me not to do. I panicked. This is the suitcase that he keeps locked, so if there's anything incriminating, it ought to be in here--I read Agatha Christie--and I figured if I was going to screw things up for your Mr. Cowley, then I might as well try to find him something to make up for it." I ran out of breath. The arm didn't feel real anymore; it felt dead and overweight and sore.

Doyle looked up at Bodie and said, "Take it easy, mate. She did us a bit of a favor." Glancing down at me, he grinned. "And got a hell of a reward for it."

After a moment, Bodie nodded and slid a hand under my good arm. "Hurt anywhere else, luv? Think you can walk downstairs so we can put you in an ambulance?"

"Ambulance?" Then, coming closer, I heard the distinctive, peculiar, off-on wailing that British ambulances make when they're in a hurry.

Something passed between them, and Doyle took over again. "Yes, Miss McGregor, ambulance. And we'll want you to lie down and play dead for us on the stretcher." When I started to protest, he put a finger against my lips. "We want Wolfgang to think you're as badly hurt as possible. For your own protection."

Bodie added, "Your boyfriend's the nervous type."

To be truthful, I didn't like the sound of that either. I gave in, anyway. "Don't send me to St. Christopher's then. Everybody will talk. And I'll have to call my mother when we get there. She always calls me on Saturday nights, and if I'm not

here, she'll have the American Embassy on the line so fast it'll make your head spin."

Bodie snorted at that and turned away muttering something about "she's got to call her mum."

I had to go and lie down on the stretcher just about the time people started pouring out of the woodwork. The EMT in charge gave me something for the pain, and about the time I started to fade out, I heard Bodie handing out orders about collecting my things and tearing the flat apart for evidence.

Doyle got on the 'bus with me. Sleepily, I told him, "Tell them not to lose my teddy bear."

He chuckled again, then lightly laid his hand over mine. I turned my hand over so I could interlace my fingers with his. I felt more alive that way.

Then I fell asleep again.

You know the famous TV cliché about people being held incommunicado in hospitals? Well, the cops--or whoever these people were--actually did it. And what does it feel like to be the innocent victim? Nervewracking. And boring. The only person I spoke to was my mother. I told her I broke my arm in a car accident. And then I convinced her not to worry, and that was some trick. At least I knew she wouldn't fly from Detroit to London because I had a broken arm.

At three p.m. on Sunday afternoon, one full day after all this mess had started, I had a bandage a half-inch thick on my left arm four inches above my wrist and reaching to my elbow, a headache from the British equivalent of Tylenol No. 3, and a case of boredom thick enough to cover the Empire State Building. I paced back and forth and stared out of the window since there was little or nothing on the TV.

To my surprise, I jumped when the door opened. Then, on seeing that it was Mr. Cowley and the twins, I relaxed.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Cowley," said I.

He limped. It was obvious: right leg involvement, and if I'd had to guess, I'd have said above the knee, although I couldn't be sure. He stopped inside the door, with the twins in formation behind him, and smiled at me.

"Good afternoon, Miss McGregor. I trust you're feeling better today?"

I went over and scooted myself up onto the side of the bed with the help of my uninjured arm. "Oh, the usual complications, but otherwise I'm fine." At his inquiring glance, I elaborated, "Headache from the codeine, the shakes from the trauma, and a massive case of boredom."

"Well, we hope to alleviate the last of those complaints shortly. I brought you one of the articles you asked for." He gestured, and the twin-with-the-Toni (Doyle) handed me a paper bag. I got it open with my right hand, and found my Teddy. I pulled him out, grinning like a fool. I couldn't

take my puppy to England; Customs frowns on that. But I could take Theodore Roosevelt.

"You did find him!" I was trying to resettlement his bowtie when I realized that my twenty-year-old clumsy stitches in his battered chest had been replaced. "I don't know who put in the new sewing, but they did a good job."

Mr. Cowley nodded, and I noticed that the twins seemed to relax a little. He preempted the easy chair, and the two of them split up--Bodie against the doorjamb and Doyle at the foot of my bed.

"Your professors think highly of you, Miss McGregor. And, I might add, so does Sister Alleyn. I'm pleased to see that you noticed the stitches."

"Of course I did--they were twenty years old after all--I--" And then the old movie cliché about dolls and Teddy bears hit me and I went all-over-hot. "Oh, dear. You thought I'd hidden something in him, didn't you?"

"Unfortunately," his Scots voice rumbled like the ocean off the Isle of Skye, "we have to be suspicious. Even in view of your splendid work record and your injury. I, at least, am satisfied of your innocence. In the future, however, I would suggest that you be a bit more careful in allowing strange men to pick you up at--science-fiction conventions."

I flushed again, and fiddled with Theodore's bowtie, and out of the corner of my eye I saw Doyle glance at Bodie and exchange a commiserating smile. They had been talking to Sister Alleyn--it was her comment, hardly refurbished. "I don't usually let men pick me up, Mr. Cowley. I'm not that kind of girl. It's just that he seemed nice, and I--well--"

He looked like my father, leaning forward, talking sternly to me. "And you were lonely. Wolfgang likes lonely young women. You can count yourself lucky that you didn't end up like the last woman we know about. Our last witness, I might add, before you. Her parents buried her two weeks ago."

I started biting the nails on my good hand.

"My offer to you of passage back to America still stands. In all confidence, I must warn you that you will probably not live out your internship if you simply return to St. Christopher's. If you are still willing to be a witness for us, then I will have you placed in protective custody, until we locate Wolfgang."

"What about my internship?"

"I can arrange for you to continue it later."

He'd arrange-- How-- "You people aren't really cops, are you?"

Mr. Cowley blinked, and glared impartially at the twins. "Were you told that?"

Again, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Doyle looking a little nervous. "Oh, no, sir. Mr. Doyle told me it was as good a term as any, and Mr. Bodie--" there was a disgruntled murmur from the door, but I ignored it-- "said, not exactly."

"Not exactly," the older man mused. "Accurate. We belong to a government agency called CI5. Primarily, we deal with terrorists."

"Like Wolfgang."

"Yes."

"He--really did blow up that building."

He almost looked understanding. "And others. There was a school once, in Eire."

A school. Children like that little seven-year-old. I closed my eyes and prayed to the one who takes care of us fools and children, and then I heard myself say, "Yes, Mr. Cowley. I'll be your witness. Just tell me what I have to do."

Early Monday morning, Ray Doyle came and collected me from the hospital, much to the head nurse's silent disapproval.

"What about clothes?" I asked.

"Oh, they're at the house already," Doyle said cheerfully. "Courtesy of CI5 Moving and Storage."

"Thank you. I think."

He chuckled.

"Where's the other half of the team?"

"Bodie? At the car." He put a hand under my good arm, as if to add support. I noticed then that his eyes flicked back and forth across the hallways, and that he frequently paused to glance over his shoulder, so casually that it went unnoticed by the patients and personnel we went past.

At least it was Doyle who'd come to get me. Him I felt a little comfortable with. Doyle's upturned green eyes met mine briefly, and then he smiled at me. "Don't let Bodie get up your nose, luv. Mind you, I know he can be a right pain on occasion"--at this point, we reached the lobby, and Doyle stopped to survey the area before starting forward--"but he's not as bad as 'e seems."

He navigated the lobby safely, and then crossed to the same little yellow car as they'd used last time.

Bodie was leaning against the car, arms folded; on seeing us, he straightened and opened the passenger door.

"Why," Doyle said, his eyes wide and beautifully innocent, "dig under that hard exterior, and you'll find--a hard interior." He grinned at Talldarkandnasty.

Bodie snorted. He also muttered something that sounded like, "Sod off, sunshine." He got into the front side passenger seat.

"Hey," I said, leaning forward, "there's something no one ever told me."

"What's that?" said Doyle.

"What was in that suitcase I swiped?"

Bodie half-twisted to glance at me. "'Is own private armory, wasn't it?"

"Ouch." I sat back and stared out the window. Bodie turned around.

Doyle drove as if he were testing out to replace David Starsky. I cringed a little as we came too close to a truck--excuse me, a lorry--and then overcompensated toward the ditch. Bodie glanced over the back of the seat at me and grinned, but it wasn't quite friendly; he was grinning at me, not with me.

"Relax, lass," he said. "Ray here's never cracked us up yet."

I smiled, and murmured, "Just so long as he doesn't double-clutch me into a truck."

His eyebrows lifted. I shrugged. Unsmogged air blew my hair into my face, in spite of the scarf I'd been told to wear.

Doyle had mentioned something about a safehouse in Kent. As close to the country as I'd been in the past two months. On the spur of the moment, I quoted Keats at him.

"To one who has been long in city pent, 'Tis very sweet to look into the fair And open face of heaven, --to breathe a prayer Full in the smile of the blue firmament."

Bodie's eyes widened, and his smile broadened into something very real and very unnerving. "'Who is more happy, when, with heart content, Fatigued he sinks into some pleasant lair Of wavy grass, and reads a debonair And gentle tale of love and languishment?'"

I gaped. Then I laughed in delight. "You read Keats?"

"Reads more'n that," Doyle interjected. "Fair talks your head off with it."

Bodie scowled and said, "At least I've got a head, sunshine."

Putting on a bright and innocent expression--at least I hoped it was--I asked, "If Mr. Doyle hasn't got a head, then why is he driving? Or did you give it up for Lent?"

Doyle's head went up, and his astonished eyes met mine in the mirror. Bodie's smile came back, and he said, in mock-surprise, "Hey, mate, our Yank talks!"

"My name," said I, "is not Yank. And if you listened to me instead of waving guns around like--TV cops, you'd know I talked. What did you think I did--" Bodie's smile broadened again and I hastily backpedaled before he could answer. "--Besides picking up strange men in science-fiction conventions?" I counted a beat, then added, "On the other hand, I'm sitting here with you two and you're about as strange as they come, so I guess I am in trouble."

After a long pause, Bodie bared all of his

teeth at me, and replied, mock-threatening, "If you don't stop talking, Yank, you won't have to guess. Besides, we picked you up, remember?"

"How could I forget your charming personality and winning smile?" Good guy or not, he was as cold and slippery as an eel--nothing there you could get a handle on. Dangerous. He made me nervous, and I don't like people who make me nervous.

Doyle snickered at that. "You can't, luv. He's just too memorable."

Bodie glared at him and I got smart before I thought better of it. "Y'mean, it's like I've grown accustomed to his face?"

In turn I got a sharp look and a thoroughly working-class British, "And she's even got 'erself an education, hasn't she?"

I gave Bodie the Brit equivalent of 'the bird,' and he practically fell on the floor laughing. It wasn't that funny. Trying for a quick-freeze tone, I said, "Mister Bodie, if you please--"

He came up off the floor with a pained and annoyed look. "Drop the Mister, will you?"

"What am I supposed to call you? 'Hey, you'? I don't even know your first name."

Bodie started to say something, but Doyle's voice overcut it, and then Bodie gave the other a look, but by then it was said anyway.

"William Andrew Philip."

"William Andrew Philip?!" Well, if any poor child could carry off three names, Tall-dark-good-looking-and-nasty probably could. "What in the world do they call you out of that?"

He turned a glacial and withering look on me. "Bodie." Then he looked at Doyle and said, "All right for you, mate, just you wait."

Ignoring the interplay, I said, "If he's Bodie, are you Doyle?"

"Ray'll do for me," he said, glancing up into the mirror and flashing me a smile.

"Golliwog's not particular," was Bodie's disgruntled comment.

At that, Doyle gave him a beautifully choreographed glare and I started laughing. "Did you have this act planned, or do you just make it up as you go along?"

"Monty Python," said Ray, "that's us. What do you go by?"

I shrugged. "Depends. Rachel, mostly, or Rache. Some of my friends call me Mac."

Bodie said, with a gleam in his eyes, "Nope, not Mac. Don't look it at all. Shelley, maybe--"

Shelley? "Oh, Lord, that's enough to make my back teeth hurt! Look, I'll make you a deal. You just call me Rachel and I'll forget the 'William Andrew Whatsis' and all the other names I've thought

of for you."

He looked suspiciously at me. Doyle contributed, "I'd take her up on it, sunshine. Sneaky, these Yanks."

Bodie hmm'd and didn't say anything else--particularly because at that moment, Ray turned the wheel and the car skidded into a driveway. Ray said, "Here we are." And added, "And there's Murphy."

Murphy? Who was Murphy? I looked at the guy who was lounging on the doorstep and involuntarily whistled. Did Mr. Cowley choose his agents for their looks? When I whistled, the twins glanced at each other and sighed as if they'd expected it.

Ray steered the car into the garage. This time I kept my mouth shut.

Murphy sauntered in and leaned on Bodie's door. "Area's been checked. Unless you brought trouble in with you, she's right."

"No one was tailing us," said Doyle.

Sotto voce, I murmured, "They couldn't have kept up with us."

Bodie snorted. Ray shot me a dirty look, and Murphy hid a grin by turning away. Then Ray helped me peel myself out of the little white car. I was thankful for my jeans.

Once inside, they went off to check out the house. I stood in the living room and rubbed my bandaged arm, looking around myself. Someone had set up a desk in one corner, and it was stacked two feet high and three feet thick with manila envelopes and file folders. I wondered what that was all about, and shrugged at myself. That, of course, set my arm to aching again, so I sent myself off to find a glass of water with which to take a pill.

They were standing in the kitchen, the three I knew and a fourth man I didn't, talking in soft-pitched voices. I stopped in the doorway; all four turned to look at me and I felt distinctly an intruder.

"Uh--my arm's hurting. I just came in to get a glass of water to take a pill with."

Doyle nodded, and got a glass out of the cabinet. While he filled it from the tap, I struggled with the bottle of acetaminophen-and-codeine. The left arm was still unusable, and I was never much good at opening bottles one-handed.

I didn't have to struggle long; Bodie took the pillbottle out of my hand and opened it.

"Thank you," I told him, and held out a hand for the bottle. He took the hand in his and shook out two of the white tablets into my palm.

"Hurt much, luv?" he said.

It took a second look for me to realize that the smile was in his eyes as well this time. Whatever I'd done, it had been the right thing.

"Well," I answered, "I'd compare it favorably

to being run over by a two-ton--lorry--but that's all the good I can say for it." I popped the two pills, drank the water Doyle handed me, and grimaced. "Chr--cripe, there's one thing British ingenuity hasn't improved on. These pills still taste awful!"

That produced a laugh from them. Still feeling ill-at-ease and out-of-place, I wandered back out into the front room, and stared restlessly at the files. They didn't seem about to do anything, so after a minute I settled down on the sofa and put my head back and tried to sleep.

Pretty soon I wakened out of the half-doze to the sound of Murphy and his partner making 'going-to-leave' noises. I heard them go out through the kitchen. After a short while, the sound of their car engine started, then faded away into the distance. I started to pull myself up with my left arm, and all the pleasant numbness went away. Should have known better than to use the arm, but the codeine numbed my head enough that I easily forgot.

From the kitchen, Bodie called, "Hey, Yank! Do you drink tea?"

"My name's not Yank," I returned. "And yes, I drink tea."

"Right, Yank," he said cheerfully. "How do you take it?"

He was probably doing it deliberately. I sighed and said, "Lemon, no sugar."

"You mean that we have to go out and buy lemons?"

"No, just forget it, I'll take it plain."

"Right."

Under the sound of running water, Doyle said something I didn't hear clearly, and then an inside door shut.

It was too early to take another pill. Instead, I walked restlessly around the room. The chairs were dusty. The curtains looked as if they might be dusty too. I stopped to finger one, and heard the wind blowing across the fields. I idly pulled the curtain back, staring out at the unmowed grass.

Behind me, something heavy thumped down against wood. I started to swing around, but before I even got halfway, an arm went around my waist and another around my shoulders, and I went down onto my left shoulder with Bodie on top of me. In the next moment, he was back up with gun out, peering out from the side of the window, barely touching the curtain with one hand.

Doyle came rocketing in, also with gun drawn. He stopped and looked from Bodie to me and back again, obviously confused. He took a breath, and said, "What happened?"

Bodie holstered his gun and made some gesture. Looking at me, he said, "Just what in the bloody hell did you think you were doing?"

"Nothing--I was just looking out of the window--"

Doyle's face changed; he nodded, and then put his gun away. He came over and pulled me to my feet. Bodie took a breath and then went on.

"You know better, goddamnit, we told you-- Anyone could have seen you!"

"There's no one out there. There's grass from here to--to London, for all I know!"

"That grass," Doyle said, "is up to my waist. Do you have any idea how many people could be hiding in 'that grass'?"

"People don't hide in grass. They only do that in books and B-movies." I knew how stupid I had just been, and perversely was trying to justify myself.

"And in the paras, and the SAS, and the mercs-- and in the terrorist squads." Doyle still had a grip on my good arm.

Bodie's face had smoothed out. He looked cool and a little contemptuous. "I did it in Angola. Wolfgang can do it here."

"But--the other man, Murphy--he said the area was clear!"

"And Murphy's good." Bodie again. "But so is Wolfgang. It only takes one bloody mistake, and that was a stupid mistake, girl!"

"Yes, sir." I rubbed my arm again. "I'm sorry. I just--I just didn't think. It won't happen again."

After a minute, Bodie nodded. "Right." He took another deep breath, then went back to where the teapot teetered precariously on the telephone table.

"That big lug hurt you much when he landed on you?" Doyle tossed the question out, feeling delicately along the bandage.

Bodie snorted.

"No--it was sore already. If I'd thought about it, he wouldn't have had to knock me down anyway."

Bodie set the teapot down on the low table in front of the sofa and went back into the kitchen.

"Don't worry about it, Rachel," said Doyle. "You just gave us both a right scare; no harm done this time, so don't worry. What do you take in your tea?"

"Nothing, if you don't keep lemon."

Bodie came back out with cups, milk, and sugar. "Figures. Barbaric."

"Ha." I was feeling less stunned, so I told him, "Englishmen don't drink tea, they drink milk and sugar. Besides, if you want to see barbaric, you ought to try the coffee you people drink. It's about fit for car batteries and not much more. It's a good thing I don't like coffee."

Bodie grinned at me, and said in tones of intense sarcasm, "She doesn't like it and she criticizes it."

I simply lifted my eyebrows at him, and then was inspired. "What's all that mess on the desk?"

They both groaned and said in tones of disgust, "Files."

"What's wrong with files?" I inquired.

"They're boring," Bodie said. "File-reading's no job for a field op, anyway, luv."

"Somebody has to read them. I do it all the time."

"Listen, Yank, if your clearance was right, I'd let you read mine any time you wanted."

I opened my mouth to complain about the 'Yank' one more time, saw the amusement in his dark blue eyes, and gave it up as a bad job.

Three or four nights later I had the first nightmare. It was nothing clear or memorable, just a melange of images and fear. I sat up in the bed, shaking, not sure where I was or what was going on for several minutes. The room was too dark and too close, so I pulled on my robe and went barefooted to the bedroom door.

There was a light on in the front room, and Bodie was on the couch. Doyle was on the chair across from him. The envelopes and files were in piles on the table between them.

"You ruddy jerk!" said Bodie. "Why'd you put the ones you finished on the pile I'm reading? You didn't do a good enough job, I've got to do them over for you?"

"Look, mate, I just got the piles mixed up. Not like you never did it. Here, give me the bloody things and I'll dump 'em on the floor." He looked up. "Wake you up, luv?"

"Who, me? No, I just--thought I'd make some tea. Sound all right to you?" Sure I was going to tell them I'd just had a nightmare.

Bodie twisted around on the paisley sofa and gave me a mocking grin. "I thought all you American birds were into 'Lib.'"

Ah, ha. You asked for it, turkey. "For your information, young man, 'Lib' is defined as equality of opportunity, as in share and share alike. Defined even more simply for your level of intelligence, it can be explained as--you made tea this afternoon, I make tea tonight--and you make breakfast tomorrow morning." I counted to three, then added, "That is, if either of you gentlemen can cook." It was a question. All we'd had for the past two days was donuts, instant coffee, takeout Chinese, and sandwiches. Once I'd been offered the British version of Swanson's Frozen Dinners and said a polite, "No, thanks."

The heavy sound of silence hung in the room. After a bit, Doyle said, "I can cook a little."

Bodie retorted, "That's your opinion, mate."

None of the men I've known--excepting my father--knew the first thing about cooking. "Fine, then. I'll cook and you clean."

The kitchen was at the back of this cottage, abutting one of the bedrooms and the bathroom. I went through the short hallway from the living room to the kitchen, found the teapot and the teakettle, and got water on the gas range to boil.

Doyle followed me in. He looked skeptical, and took the canister I tried to open away from me, opened it, and measured the loose tea into the pot. "You can cook one-handed?"

"If I want something cut up or carried, I'll call for one of you. Otherwise, I'll manage. Use it or lose it, they tell me." I tried to lift the teapot, and he took that from me as well. He also carried the tray in without being asked, and set it down on the coffeetable between two stacks of files.

I sat down on the opposite end of the couch from Bodie, and Doyle eased down into the armchair across from the couch and coffeetable.

Bodie poured me a cup of tea. To my embarrassment, when I tried to pick it up, my hand shook so badly that I slopped tea onto the tray. I set the cup back down, harder than I intended, and it nearly tipped over, but Bodie's hand shot out--once again, I noticed that the man moved fast--and righted it.

"Thanks," I muttered. He shrugged. By this time, I knew I wasn't fooling anybody--nobody about nothing--but they seemed to appreciate my efforts at composure. I felt like I'd jump out of my skin if I didn't do something. "Are there any biscuits in the kitchen?"

"I don't know," said Doyle. "I didn't look."

"Well, I think I will."

In rummaging through cupboards, I found two boxes of biscuits and a stack of dusty paperbacks. I'm one of the people who will read almost anything, including the back of cereal boxes, so I opened one at random and flipped through.

As far as I'm concerned, and a lot of people disagree with me, there's nothing worse than a Harlequin. The Brits proved me wrong again. Even a confirmed Harlequin reader wouldn't have touched this. I got through a third of the book in twenty minutes, turned, and fired it into the corner.

Both of the twins came in at a run, and I put my hands up. I should have thought before I did that... "My fault, sorry. But that book is so bad--"

Bodie retrieved the garish paperback and thumbed through it, looking doubtful. "What do you mean, bad?"

"Read it," said I.

He got apparently about three pages down before he made a decisive face and handed it back. "No, thanks, luv. It's all yours."

Doyle held a hand out, and I told him, "Wait, you can't truly appreciate it unless you hear it." I then gave him a five-paragraph dramatic reading. I'm not as good as a woman I knew from around home, but the material spoke for itself. Doyle had to sit down, he was laughing so hard.

I fired the book back emphatically, and sighed. "I wish there was something decent to read around here. I finished my last book tonight."

"What do you like?" Doyle stretched his legs out and yawned. "One of us has to go out tomorrow--we'll get you something."

"I'll read almost anything. I like science fiction and mysteries. Agatha Christie mysteries, please--if I got anything 'real,' it'd really give me bad dreams." Suddenly I was tired, and I wanted my tea, and I wanted to be able to go to sleep, but I was too afraid of dreaming again. "I'd better drink that tea before it gets cold."

"It is cold," Bodie replied. "I'll pour you a fresh cup."

"Share and share alike," was my cheerful comment.

He stopped in the doorway and looked at me, and the look in his eyes made me a little nervous; I couldn't read it. "Someday I'll take you up on that." Then he was out front before I could find anything to say in reply.

Doyle was smiling faintly.

"If I didn't know better, Ray, I'd say he just made an improper remark!" It was a play on one of the lines I'd read from the book, and he laughed at me with his pale-green eyes.

"Got it in one, Rache. You want that tea before it gets cold?"

"I'm not sure I do, if it means I have to go near Talldarkandnasty," I answered. I wasn't thinking again--but luckily, he only exploded with laughter. Then he shook his head at me and said, "G'on and drink your tea."

Bodie was back at the files again, frowning as he read, and there was a steaming cup of tea in front of where I had been sitting on the couch. I took a taste, paused, tasted it again, and said, "What in the world is in this tea?"

"Scotch," was the laconic answer.

"Scotch?"

He glanced over, not exactly smiling, and said with the closest thing to real kindness I'd heard out of him yet, "It'll help you sleep. Drink it."

I drank it.

And yes, pretty soon I did start to feel sleepy, so sleepy that I couldn't even make myself get up and go back to bed.

Doyle's voice woke me out of my half-doze. "I could do the maiden-carried-up-the-stairs routine for you, but wouldn't you rather walk?"

"You couldn't carry me," I said, pulling myself to my feet.

"I can carry Sunshine there," he said, nodding at Bodie. "So I can carry you." He grinned at me. "Want to take me up on it?"

It's embarrassing to be twenty-five years old and still find yourself blushing at suggestive remarks. It's even worse to realize that you can still be afraid of the dark. Ray glanced at me, then at the bedroom door, then leaned forward and grabbed a handful of the files.

"C'mon, Rachel, I'll play guardian gargoyle, even if I won't be sitting over your door." He put a hand on my shoulder. "You'll only be stiff if you fall asleep here."

By this time, it was all I could do to keep my eyes open. So I gave in with good grace and stumbled into the bed, dizzy with Scotch and sleepiness. Putting my head flat on the pillow was a great relief. I got a glimpse of Ray settling himself into the wing-backed chair by the window and opening his files, before I dropped off so quickly it even surprised me.

The murmur of two men talking quietly woke me. I felt too relaxed to do more than roll over on my back and eavesdrop with my eyes closed. When I moved, the sound paused. When I continued to breathe regularly, and kept my eyes shut, the voices went on.

"Guess she's asleep." Doyle.

"You've been up the past two nights, mate." Bodie. "She's asleep. She'll never notice it's me and not you. Go on and get a decent rest for a change."

"Even if you're playing hard man?"

Bodie sighed; he sounded exasperated, so this was obviously a sore point. "Look, someone has to keep our Yank from forgetting what we're here for. And I thought Yanks were supposed to know all about crime-- Too bloody innocent for her own bloody good. She acts like she likes you, so we might as well play on that. Besides, Sunshine, let's face it--I look the part more than you."

"Tall-dark-and-nasty," Doyle murmured.

"What?" Bodie sounded taken aback.

"What she called you tonight, mate, right after you walked out. Tall-dark-and-nasty."

I was going to kill him. I was.

There was a long pause, and then, in a voice struggling between laughter and outrage, Bodie said, "Bloody cheek she's got."

"And an education. Not like most of your birds, eh? Most of them wouldn't know a dictionary if it fell on them."

"Too bloody cheeky by half, the both of you," grumbled Bodie. "Go on and get some sleep, will you?"

Ray chuckled and walked out.

I heard Bodie mutter, "Tall-dark-and-nasty?" in a tone of wonderment before settling into the chair. Slitting my eyes open a fraction, I could see him leaning back with his legs outstretched and his big capable hands clasped in his lap. His sculptured hands, with those thick corded wrists, looked oddly gentle at rest. He looked almost peaceful, lying there.

Doyle was all nervous energy, like a ferret or a hunting dog, and Bodie was all stillness, like some big lazy cat. I had both eyes open now, because he looked as if he were asleep himself. Something prickled up my back, and I looked up--straight into a pair of amused navy-blue eyes studying me with unapologetic frankness.

I blushed again.

He smiled.

I rolled over on my side and burrowed my head into my pillow, and heard him chuckle softly. Sneaky. I waited for him to say something smug, something insulting, but I fell asleep still expecting it, and it hadn't happened.

When I woke up the next morning, Bodie was asleep in the armchair. I got up and found my robe, and brushed my hair. As I turned away from the mirror, his eyes opened and focused on me. He smiled, sleepily, and the eyes shut again.

Doyle was up already, toweling his hair in the living room; had his morning shower then. He grinned at me. "Want some breakfast? My turn to cook."

"Sounds terrific."

"Come in and keep me company," he suggested.

I curled up in a kitchen chair, yawning, watching him bustle about the sink and stove. "You'll make some woman a good wife someday."

"Snarky this morning, in't she?" Doyle threw the comment at me without turning. "Tea on the burner, luv, want a cup?"

"Yes, thanks."

Over the smell of frying bacon, he brought me tea. His face had sobered.

"Rachel?"

"Yes?"

"Have you talked to your mum lately?"

"Yes, Saturday. You know that."

"Yeah." He planted his hands on the table and leaned toward me. "Did you tell her the truth?"

"Well--no, not exactly--"

"Don't you think you should?"

"But--"

He tilted my head up a moment. Then the hand moved down, resting lightly on the bandage on my arm. "Rachel, have you thought this out? You're not here on a vacation, sweetheart. You might get hurt. Dunnit seem you ought to tell your mum?"

Might get hurt. I tried to think of how I could tell her. "Maybe--"

"Wait till it's about seven in the States," he suggested, and turned back to the food.

I gave the number to the Overseas Operator in a fairly steady voice. The phone rang on the other end, and then Mom answered.

"Hi, Mom, it's me." I got her to get my father on the second phone, and then I tried to explain to the both of them that I was in protective custody, that I was a witness and hadn't done anything wrong, and that...I might not come home...

For a long moment, there was only silence on the other end.

Dad said, "Are you all right now?"

"Yeah, just--jumpy."

"Are they taking care of you?"

"Yes, I've got two bodyguards here in the house with me, and there are people outside."

"They're police?"

"Well, more like the FBI."

Mom interrupted. "Rachel, do you want me to come there?"

"What, here?" Oh, God, yes, I wanted my mother-- "Mom, it's not going to help any, really. They wouldn't be able to let you see me; I'm not supposed to go outside or anything. I'm okay, really. It's all going to be over in a week or so anyway."

"What about your internship?" Dad asked.

"The head of this department, Mr. Cowley, he talked to the coordinator at St. Christopher's, and they'll let me interrupt my internship until all this is over."

"Well, that's good, at least. You're sure you're going to be all right?"

"Yes, Dad, I will. I'll call you when this is all finished, I promise."

Ray tapped me on the shoulder and handed me a penciled note. 'Tell them to call Cowley if they want to ask about you.' He scribbled the number down and I read it off to Mom and Dad.

As soon I finished, he shredded the note and dropped the scraps in the wastebasket. Then he made a throat-cutting gesture, and scribbled on another scrap of paper. 'Might be buggy.'

"Mom, Dad, I have to go. Call Mr. Cowley if you get worried. I'll be okay. Really."

"All right." My mom sounded calm and collected. She'd be in hysterics after I hung up, I knew it.

"I love you," I said.

"We love you," said my father.

The connection broke. Ray took the receiver out of my fingers.

"Hey," he said gently.

I shook my head and dashed off to the bathroom, where I locked the door, sat on the commode, and cried.

Three mornings later, when a car pulled up in front of the house, I got a demonstration of Great Britain's tax pounds at work. Both of the pet gargoyles froze. Then they were up and moving-- Doyle flowing out of the room like a ferret scenting food, Bodie in a panther's idea of full gallop. Their impressive guns were drawn and ready; their faces were like something out of one of my nightmares.

I felt pinned-to-my-chair paralyzed.

Two someones came through the front door, and Doyle said, in unfeigned pleasure, "Ah, here she is. Hullo, Sallie, how's the weather in the Outer Hebrides?"

The answer missed me; I was in the loo losing both breakfast and last night's dinner. When I came back, someone had cleared away the dishes, and a young woman was sitting at the kitchen table with the twins and Murphy, drinking tea and talking. She had my shade of red hair (only our hairdresser knows for sure), and looked about my height and build-- possibly a bit shorter and heavier, though her weight was probably mostly muscle. Glancing up, she smiled and tipped her teacup at me.

"You must be Rachel. I'm Sara Brandon--Sallie preferably and Sara Jane only to some twits--" She glared at Bodie, who returned an unrepentant grin. Then, back at me, "Anyway, I'm your double, so we need to have a chat." She eyed the men. "Don't you blokes have files to read?"

"Not me," Murphy replied. "I'm here strictly as dogsbody."

"Then go and play patience. This is girl-talk."

The three of them grumbled, but sauntered out. A friend of a friend once said that watching a certain man walk was one of the great aesthetic and possibly religious experiences of the decade, and I was beginning to understand why.

Sallie sighed. "A bit of all right, eh?"

"Which one? Murphy, Doyle, or--Talldarkand-nasty?"

For a moment, I thought she'd fall on the floor laughing. Wiping her eyes, she said, "Oh, that's good. I like that. But you just 'aven't seen 'im when 'e's being charming. It's awe-inspiring, it is."

"Maybe he figures I'm just not worth the bother," I suggested sourly.

"More like he's just playing hard to keep you on your toes," Sallie said gently. "Not that I'm not saying he can't be truly terrifying when 'e feels like it, but usually--" She shook her head. "Those two can pull in the birds with no trouble, and 'alf the girls in the office wanting to be in the net, too. Almost a sin. Well, back to business. Cowley's picked me as your double, and I'll need to borrow some clothes. Nothing unusual, but something you think Wolfgang would recognize."

"Jeans and a T-shirt, then. But what do you mean, double?"

"We'll have to move you eventually, and the old man wants someone who looks like you to confuse the issue. Muck up the scent." She sighed. "If it's night and cool, do you wear a jumper or a mac?"

"Uh--a sweater--I mean jumper. I've got a long blue one I use like a light overcoat."

"Right. How's your stomach, luv? Feel up to going in and helping me pick out a few things?"

I wasn't sure how she knew I'd been sick, but I didn't ask. "I'll be all right."

"Never had any doubt of that." Sallie nodded at me. "Not from what Bodie and Doyle had to say about you." With another grin, she added, "Might set you back a bit, but our gentlemen are rather proud of 'their Yank.'"

I hate being speechless.

We went on to my bedroom, and she rummaged through my eclectic wardrobe. After about thirty seconds, she hauled out a yellow T-shirt that said, 'Yes, there is a Kalamazoo,' a pair of bluejeans, and my long blue sweater, dropped them on the bed, and pulled out--those.

"These are gorgeous! Why aren't you wearing these instead of jeans?"

In spite of the memories, I was drawn forward to finger the silky caftan and the softer, firmer satin of the dress. If anyone had ever told me I'd be able to wear a caftan open to my waist and with about enough back to cover a grasshopper, or a dress with almost no shoulders and a slit skirt, I'd have died laughing. Apparently the right amount of money can work wonders. I said softly, "Paul bought them for me." I didn't want to look at her. "The only things I let him buy me--well, not counting some stockings and a garter belt or two."

"What kind of stockings?"

Ever since the first pair he'd coaxed me into wearing, I'd felt--funny. A little soiled, maybe. There hadn't been anyone with whom I felt comfortable in discussing it; but I felt that Sallie would understand, that she wouldn't blame me for passively

accommodating him. "Dark ones, blue or black, once dark green, very silky and tight, and patterned mostly." I'd never been able to think about it without feeling ashamed. Ashamed of being--excited by it, too.

Sallie looked at me. She nodded. "Liked to take 'em off you, didn't he?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes--he didn't bother." I sat down on the bed, shivering.

Dropping down on the bed beside me, Sallie patted my shoulder. "Men can be a little kinky, pet. Finding your first kink's always a bit of a shock. Don't let it bother you too much--we all run into one sooner or later. You said he tried to buy you other things?"

"Oh, yes. Finally I got ticked enough to threaten to move out if he didn't stop. I told him we might be living together but he wasn't keeping me."

"My word! Was he marked at that?"

"No, not really, he was-- It was funny." I could remember exactly and vividly how he'd looked. "He looked like I'd--punched him somewhere sensitive. Then he smiled, not the usual butter-wouldn't-melt-in-his-mouth smile, but like he was really pleased and startled. He said--'American independence. Marvelous.' And then he kissed me. He didn't try to buy me things after that. And--" There had been something else about it that caught my attention. I thought a bit. "He didn't sound British then."

"Didn't sound British how?"

Her voice indicated that this was important. I remembered the scene--I like voices, and usually I remember them, but I especially remember unusual voices. "He sounded most of the time like educated upper-middle-class British. Almost--actor British. Is this making any sense?"

"Lots, luv. Go on."

"When he called me 'American,' he sounded--well, foreign. I'd tell you German, but I couldn't prove it. I don't know dialects really, I just remember voices."

"That's more than we've had, Rachel, and the old man will be pleased. We've suspected Wolfgang of being foreign, but this may give us a handle. German's a good guess-- He's a free-lancer, you know, no politics, no convictions, just an interest in money and bombs." She looked steadily at me, sympathetic. "Like I said, luv, a little off his nut."

I felt sick again, but I took a deep breath and nodded.

"You'll be all right," she said, patting my shoulder again. "Give it time, luv. I tell you what--when all this is done, Susan and I will take you out for some real London. You'll like Susan."

"I'd like that."

"It's a date. Well--I'd better pack myself off

before McNab takes it that Murphy and I eloped."

That, at least, made me laugh.

In the front room, Sallie and Bodie engaged in a friendly war of insults while Murphy brought the car up. She slipped out of the door and sprinted to the car before the wind had time to do more than tug at the scarf over her hair.

"Get along all right?" Ray asked.

"Like a house on fire." At his puzzled look, I said, "She's marvelous, isn't she?"

"Rather."

Bodie's dark blue eyes gleamed. "At least our Yank's got good taste in girl-friends."

"Will you stop calling me 'Yank'?" I demanded.

He drew himself up to his full and very impressive height, gave me a heart-stopping smile, and said, "No."

I looked at that smile. I really hate being speechless. Every bit as much as I hated the amused look in those beautiful eyes. God, I was going to kick him one of these days. That'd wipe the grin off his face.

I got my revenge, though. That night I set up my tape player and gave them two solid hours of Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath, and Arlo Guthrie. Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath didn't have much effect, except for Bodie commenting knowledgeably on the drums, and Doyle looked glazed-eyed. But the sight of two grown Britishmen trying to make sense out of "Alice's Restaurant Massacre" and "The Significance of the Pickle"--not to mention Doyle, who'd told me he'd been a narc, listening to "Coming into Los Angeles" (you know, "Coming into Los Angeles, Bringing in a couple of ki's")--was worth every "Yank" I'd suffered through in the past few days.

That talk with Sallie had put a bug in my ear. Next morning, when I heard Bodie in the shower--the man wasn't fit to live with until he'd had his morning shower and his tea--and Ray in the kitchen fiddling with skillets--he was a hellborn babe, got up whistling at six a.m.--I slipped out of bed and into my robe and slippers, and crept as quietly as possible into the front room. Files and envelopes were still scattered all over the coffee table. Not sure how much time I'd have, I passed over the envelopes and began to flip through the files. Bodie's comments about my clearance regardless, I didn't believe they'd have anything really classified where someone like me might get it.

The second file down was marked 'Morland.' The few brief notes, and the coroner's report were bad enough, indicating that this was the witness Mr. Cowley had spoken of, the one just before I'd come into the scenario. But then the file included pictures of the murder scene, pretty accurately detailing the long and involved route that Paul--Wolfgang--had used to kill Nicola Morland. It was a good thing that I hadn't eaten breakfast.

A hand came over my shoulder and appropriated

the file. When I jumped, its mate settled on my shoulder, holding me down. Ray leaned over to put the file back on the stack.

"Seen enough?" he said quietly but not unkindly.

After a second, when my heart starting beating again, I nodded. He moved the restraining hand to help me up, and guided me into the kitchen. He set me at the table, handed me a cup of English panacea, did something to the stuff in the skillet, and came back to sit down across from me.

"Be grateful it was me and not Bodie," he said. "We figured sooner or later your curiosity'd get the better of you, but he'd still have blistered your ears for it."

The thought of Bodie having caught me snooping made me shudder.

"The only reason I'm not lecturing you," Doyle continued, in a dangerously reasonable tone, "is because I figured you'd learn something about curiosity. Am I right?"

"Yes," said I, striving to sound meek.

"Good. By the time you're dressed, breakfast should be ready."

I came out, dressed, and knew immediately that Bodie'd been told of my escapade. I based my conclusions on the one brief but scorching glare I got prior to the slightest of satisfied nods.

After breakfast we all settled down in the front room, like one big happy family. They were still file-reading, occasionally side-tracked by Bodie's caustic comments on busywork and Doyle's equally caustic comments to 'tell it to the Cow.' I was engrossed in a fascinating Highlands trilogy Bodie'd brought me, and it read best while pacing.

Someone walked up onto the porch, rang the doorbell, and dropped a flat brown package through the mailslot. Once again, I disproved the adage 'live and learn.' But before I got too close to picking the thing up, even before Doyle's horrified "no!" I was already realizing I knew better and trying to get away.

Ray came hard into my left side, knocking me into the far wall and pinning me there. While I was trying to get my breath, I heard as if through a glass darkly Bodie on his "R/T" talking to CI5's version of the Bombsquad, telling them to come in the back door, saying that they were bringing me in and to alert all posts. He sounded clipped and--scared?

I tapped my savior on the shoulder. "Not that I mind having you up against me, Ray, but I'm used to my left side and I'd like it back, please."

Ray nodded and stepped away. "Did I hurt you?"

"A minor problem-- Ray, I wasn't going to pick it up."

"I could see that," he returned, "but I had to be sure."



Bodie added dryly, "Besides, at that speed he couldn't stop. Get her in the car. I'll be right there."

I was in the back of Doyle's little silver Capri before I knew what was going on... Bodie appeared, jumped in, swung around in the seat and handed me a jumbled mass of objects: my purse, my three books, and Theodore Roosevelt.

Right. Here am I, a grown woman, and what was the most comforting thing around? A thirty-five-year-old teddy bear. On this drive, I ignored the countryside. I scrunched down in the back seat, hugged Theo, and wished for Dorothy Gale's magic ruby slippers.

Curling up on a bench in the squadroom, I listened to their feet receding doubletime down the corridor. They'd literally put me in before rushing off, with a brief comment of "wait here."

I didn't have a whole lot of time to feel sorry for myself, though-- The door opened, and a small thin nondescript man sauntered in.

"Hallo, mate," he said, in a cockney you could have cut and packaged. "I'm 'Arris. You must be our Yank--the boys passed me by just now, asked me to look after you. Care for a cuppa? Sandwich? Or maybe a spot of cheerful chat?" He gave me a gap-toothed grin that thawed the shivering cold in my veins.

"All of the above?" I asked.

He chuckled. "You got it, ducks. Half a mo', I'll be right back."

By the time I'd half-finished a sandwich, gone through four cups of very strong, sweet, milky tea, and listened to him discourse on everything from the National Health Service to 'the 'orses,' I almost felt that I'd been dropped in this room for nothing more than a passing fancy. After all, there should certainly be better ways of removing troublesome witnesses than by dropping bombs disguised as flat brown parcels through a mailslot. I even began to tell myself that I had been pretty silly over the situation.

"There now, ducks," Harris said, sounding pleased. "Better already?"

"Yes, thanks."

He laughed, a short high whinny like one of the horses he talked about betting on. Then he looked over my head and stood up. "Bodie. Doyle. Time to go and see the Cow?"

I turned around, and caught the looks on their faces before they blanked and went cheerfully noncommittal.

"Feel up to talking to the old man?" Doyle said to me.

"Do I have a choice?"

"No, afraid not." He left Bodie talking to Harris, and we started down the hall to Mr. Cowley's

office, which was in a different place than the last time I'd been there. And that seemed weird.

"Why does Mr. Cowley move his office?"

Doyle smiled, as if at a private joke. "Ah, security reasons."

We passed a couple of young women carrying stenographer's pads. One was blonde; the other was small and reddish-haired, with a receding chin. She was still very pretty, though--I noticed that Doyle smiled at her without speaking. She smiled at him and went on talking to her companion, in a light breathy soprano that sounded as if I knew it. I couldn't place it, though, and I listened to it, struggling for the memory. I almost walked into a wall before Doyle steered me around the corner.

Bodie caught up with us at the office, and the three of us went in to beard the dragon.

The dragon was in particularly bad digestion today. A half-folded piece of brown paper sat on his desk, along with a thin leather-covered pamphlet and a square white card. Cowley scowled at the card, and transferred the scowl impartially to us when we walked in.

"Sit down," he said.

We did.

After a moment, Mr. Cowley removed his spectacles and laid them down. The only man I ever met who could make that simple act ice your spine like absolute zero. He handed me the pamphlet. "Do you recognize this?"

Sonnets from the Portuguese. The leather still smelt of musk cologne; Paul's cologne.

I remembered a sunny day, a month after he'd talked me into moving into his flat. Sunday--we'd taken the underground over to an open-air market, looked at hand-crocheted lace and dresses, bought apples from a vendor, and lemonade from some little boy with a stand. Paul had stopped to buy me a bunch of roses, and turned to another stand while I held the flowers.

Then he had turned to hand me a thin book with a hand-tooled leather cover. And quoted me one of the lesser-known ones... And kissed me...

"Yes," I said to the dragon. "Paul gave it to me."

"I suspected as much." He tapped his fingers against the desk, then met my eyes. "There was no bomb, Miss McGregor."

"What?"

"There was only this--"

I took the white card from his hand, and read it. Paul's elegant heavy black handwriting stood out against the textured surface.

'Not this time, liebchen. Not so soon. But perhaps next time, or the time after that--

'It's not a thing that should be rushed, after

all, wouldn't you agree?'

There was no signature, only a skillful sketch of a wolf's-head.

The bottom dropped out of my stomach, and for a minute, I thought I was going to be sick right then and there.

"Do you want to call it off?" Cowley said, in a surprisingly gentle voice.

Doyle's hand rested on my good arm a moment, and I got a breath down past the bitterness in my throat.

"No, sir." No, not now, dear God-- Let them catch him, quick. He must be--crazy. What was the definition of a sociopath? I had known once.

"Good." The tension in the room relaxed. "Do you want another team rather than Bodie and Doyle?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Cowley!"

That got me a smile. Then he nodded at us. "We shall need to move you to another safehouse. I understand that you and Sallie Brandon have met--"

A hand rested on my shoulder, and I tilted my head back to see her face. She grinned down at me. Her eyes gleamed like a cat's; her face was a little flushed, and she ran her tongue across her lips.

"Hallo, luv," she whispered.

Cowley frowned at her, but almost indulgently. "And that she has explained her position to you. Doyle, Bodie, draw another car from the pool."

My arm had begun to throb--or at least I had finally noticed that Ray had inadvertently bruised it when he knocked me up against the wall.

They all went on talking, and I blanked out a minute or two, dizzy and scared-sick.

Paul wanted to kill me. Like he'd killed that Morland girl.

"Miss McGregor?" Cowley again.

"Yes?"

"Will you be all right?"

"Yes, sir, I think so."

He nodded, then glanced at the three of them. Apparently this was a hint, because Bodie helped me to my feet and they shepherd me out.

Sallie stopped and took me by both shoulders. She frowned at me. "Take it easy, luv. Think of this as your chance to play Modesty Blaise. Where's your sense of adventure?"

"Out to lunch."

She chuckled, and squeezed my shoulder. "These two blokes aren't real subtle, but they'll take proper care of you. You let me know if they don't."

"I'm shaking in me boots," Bodie interjected

dryly as he looked down at her.

"Not bad," Ray said to him. "Can you do cockney?"

She shook her head at them and sauntered off down the corridor, looking oddly young and carefree in my yellow T-shirt and faded denims.

Ray said, in a voice that sounded sincerely cheerful. "We've got two hours to kill. Care for something to eat? The caf's not real strong on fancy things, but they make fair fish 'n chips."

"Harris brought me a sandwich earlier, but I'll drink any quantity of tea you hand me."

"Don't make promises--we might try you on that some day."

With two hours killed, they sent me off to change clothes--"Anything," Ray told me, "but T-shirt and jeans." And I rummaged several times through a suitcase someone else had hastily packed before I got a shortsleeved shirt, a brown skirt, pantyhose, and heels on. They wanted me to look different--well, I'd try. The anonymous packer had stuffed my sweater vest and my fisherman's cap in as well, and on impulse I put those on. They'd been packed away during my liaison--Paul'd never seen them.

I had the satisfaction of seeing the twins doubletake, and then Ray nodded approvingly. They escorted me out to a car, bigger than the silver Capri, and a muddy blue color, and Theo and I got into the back seat again.

Somewhere on the way to the new hideout, I realized that the strange feeling in the pit of my stomach was neither fear, nor the weird numb confusion I'd been feeling till now--I was furious. I wanted to kill Wolfgang. Failing that, I wanted to kick something sensitive, preferably half-a-foot below his belt buckle. He had no right to try and kill me.

"Rachel!"

Bodie's voice was loud enough to make me jump.

"Are we there already?" I said, sitting up. We weren't; we were in traffic heading northwest.

"We're here," Bodie said, from his twisted position, "but I don't know where you are. I've called you 'Yank' three times and you didn't bat an eyelash."

"Maybe I've learned to like it."

He snorted, but continued inexorably. "And you're strangling that poor bear, girl."

Theo's red ribbon bow did look like a dragged mess. After uselessly trying to straighten it, I took it off and stuffed it into my pocket. "I stopped being a girl at thirteen. Or, if you equate womanhood with loss of virginity, then I stopped being a girl at twenty-two."

"All right, then, don't tell me. I don't care. It's your head, and your stubbornness, and it's not

important." Bodie sounded exasperated and bewildered.

Like a blinding flash--I should have seen that the problem had half to do with the fact that I was balking him and of course Bodie-of-the-three-Christian-names didn't like to be balked. Of course someone with his temperament and training--the hints Ray handed out about his partner's past were fascinating--would not be used to being balked by anyone, much less a snide young Yank woman.

"Of course it's important," I said, trying to sound conciliatory. "If it weren't, you wouldn't be so narked by my avoiding the question."

"I am not narked--" he began, but Ray's chuckle overrode him.

"Got it in one again," Doyle said. "So what's the problem, Rachel?"

"The problem is--" How would this sound the least silly? "I'm mad enough to spit nails--I could shoot Wolfgang!"

Bodie laughed, suddenly and shortly, and it wasn't a pleasant sound. "You'll have to stand in line."

I barreled right on, determined to get it out and drop it. "He's got no right to try and kill me--I-- The only thing I ever did to him was swipe his suitcase, and it hasn't seemed to slow him down at all."

"No, you haven't done anything to him particularly," Bodie said. His face set, like granite cliffs, and his voice took on a tone denoting a lecture. "He's not quite right in the head, though-- You don't walk out on him, and I'd bet he takes it as you walking out on him. So he's going after you. To say nothing of you being a loose end. Doesn't like loose ends, he doesn't. The Morland girl--they had a real row in a bar one night and she moved out. He found her two weeks later and we got to pick up the pieces."

"What--she wasn't under protection?"

"We didn't know about her. Until it was too late."

I shivered.

"You can thank your guardian angel for us finding you," he added.

"I'm a Baptist," said I in turn, "and we don't have guardian angels."

"What do you have?"

"The good Lord who takes care of fools and children."

"And what category do you fit into?"

"I take the Fifth."

"You can't. You're in Britain."

"I'm an American," I told him haughtily. "I can take the Fifth anywhere I damn please."

"Tell it to the Marines," he answered. He looked at me a moment, and went on, more gently, "This wasn't a good time to tell you, but there wasn't a good time. You were damn lucky. You've been unconsciously throughout this entire bloody mess. The bloke is a real nutter, and there's no reason to some of the stunts he pulls." After a minute, he exhaled slowly and glanced at Doyle. "No more lectures."

Stroking Theo's matted fur, I adopted an attitude of 'whistling-past-the-graveyard.' "I'd still like to kick him someplace where it would hurt for a long time."

Doyle grinned at me in the mirror. "And we'll hold him for you, luv. Coming up on it, Bodie." He turned the car suddenly, and we shot into a stone garage at an impressive speed.

Excessive anger, in my case, tends to result in either a spurt of energy or a spurt of depression. I got energetic. It's the only reason that the next morning I was up washing clothes at seven a.m. Bodie growled at me when I swiped his dirty clothes; I told him not to grouse too loudly or I'd swipe his clean ones as well, and ducked out before he did more than sit upright in the bed and look at me. Ray, the early riser, rolled over and stared at me as if I'd grown horns and tail.

Considering the amount of my clothes that hadn't been recently washed, and my mood, I crawled into the caftan Paul'd bought me. And it was just that: a beautiful silky caftan that had cost a lot more than I could have afforded. Nothing baleful about it at all.

The energy was still pumping, so then I decided to mess up the kitchen. It isn't that cinnamon rolls are the only thing I know how to bake; but they're just about the only things I like to bake. Empty calories.

So I had gotten to the point of turning the dough out to knead, and when I looked up, Bodie was standing there. His hair was damp, and curled a little in spite of his slicking it down.

I went three steps backward, and nearly into the wall out of fright, and tried to calm my pounding heart, because there hadn't been anyone there the last time I'd looked. And if you'd looked up and found someone staring at you across a table, you might jump too.

After a couple of pungent and profane remarks, I said, "Are you trying to give me a heart attack?! Can't you cough when you come into a room? Or something?"

Bodie simply grinned at me and said, "Good morning."

"And good morning to you. What are you doing sneaking up on me like that?"

He raised his eyebrows. "I'm not sneaking up on you. I just came in to get my tea. Or if there's any of that instant coffee left, I'll take that."

I shuddered. "I'll make you tea. Watching you drink instant coffee is painful. Doesn't anyone in Great Britain use percolators?"

"Sure we do, luv, but it's such a bother. Besides, you don't have to watch me. You can go back to whatever you're baking."

"Cinnamon rolls." I dumped the dough out and began to knead it. "Your clothes ought to be dry in a half-hour or so."

"Thanks." He went over to the stove and made himself a cup of coffee. Then, leaning back against the stove, he looked me up and down. "Lovely gown. In my opinion, much better than jeans."

He looked serious. He didn't look like he was teasing. I gave my attention to the dough and said, "Well, as soon as my jeans are dry, I'll put them back on."

"Oh, not on my account, please." Bodie was smiling again.

I was at a loss and nervous and having to hastily revise my prior estimate of this man. Finally, I said feebly, "Here, you knead this. I'm wounded." Then I escaped to the stove to have a cup of tea and replan strategy.

"All right," he answered, and surprised me by rolling his sleeves up to elbow-height and going into the kneading with competence and vigor.

"I thought you said you didn't know how to cook!"

"No, I didn't. I've been a soldier long enough I know the basics. I'm just not a good cook. Doyle's decent--though too fancy for my tastes--but I haven't the knack for anything over mediocre. Bread kneading's easy."

Feeling as if he were distracted, I could lean back and enjoy watching him. And wonder why I'd let myself form such an obviously false picture of-- 'Talldarkandnasty.' The reasons were clear, though not particularly self-flattering: he hadn't approved of me in the beginning, and I'd seen it, and I'd been determined not to approve of him either. The explanation didn't leave me any easier about being attracted to him, though it left me at a psychological disadvantage.

"One question," he said. "How do you manage to bake without getting flour from your nose to your navel? I never could." He paused to stare ruefully down at his black cords, which were indeed flour-covered.

For a second, I tried to pull the top of my caftan together, which was patently impossible--it was intended to show skin. Then I said, "Uh--magic."

"Ah, now that I'll believe." He slapped the dough a final time. "There--it's stopped moving, Mum, I think it's dead. Now what?"

"It's dead, Jim," I said solemnly, suppressing an urge to giggle. "Now I take over and put the filling on, roll it up, cut it into chunks, and then we bury it in the oven for a half-an-hour."

He settled down across from me with another cup of ersatz coffee. Sitting, he was the right height to see straight down my so-called bodice--and anything I could have done to lessen the view would only have told him that I was paying attention to him. My blushing did that well enough anyway.

With its usual good timing, my hair fell into my face. I almost pushed it back before I thought about the messy state my fingers were in. I could have gone over and washed my hands, but that was a lot of trouble. Finally I said, "Bodie, would you do me a favor and push my hair back for me?"

"Right," he said, and came around the table to me. It was a simple request, wouldn't take more than a second or two, after all.

Except... He studied my hair for a little while, then slowly brought his hands up to my ears and stroked his fingers gently through the hair on either side of my head. Then, reaching a little higher, he combed the hair back from my temples with his fingers, slid the hands down, and combed one final time before easing the hair back behind my ears. His fingers rested there for what felt like an eternity. I could hear my heart, could hear the blood pounding in my eardrums. Then he nodded, looking satisfied, and stepped away.

Unable to say anything, I went back to my work, trying to ignore the shaking in my hands. And he went back to his coffee as if nothing had happened.

After the rolls were in the oven, I sat down to rest my feet. My nervous energy was fading, and I felt relaxed. The hair fell in my face again, but before I moved, Bodie reached out to slip it back in place.

"I'm going to cut that mop off one of these days," I grumbled.

He raised his eyebrows at me.

I smiled, and admitted, "Well, no, probably not."

"What are you baking?" Doyle interrupted. He was standing in the doorway, looking at us, looking amused.

"Cinnamon rolls."

"Ah-hah. Good thing I decided to get up. He'd not have woken me, and I'd've missed out." He glanced appreciatively at my caftan.

I excused myself and went off to change, putting on the skirt from yesterday and a clean blouse--well, a long painter's smock. Then I went to fold clothes, and then the rolls were done.

The twins approved of the 'breakfast,' and I ate more than I ought to. Doyle was telling me stories about the East End, while Bodie--though he must have heard the stories before now--looked on in amused disbelief. If Bodie hadn't been there, I'll bet Doyle would have been telling me fables about Bodie's supposed experiences in South Africa.

Their R/T's went off with a weird humming noise that made my fillings hurt. Bodie got to his first.

"Three seven," he said.

"Six two." Murphy's voice, filtered through the mechanical device, sounded somehow peculiar. "Is our Yank all right?"

Bodie glanced at me. "Sitting right across from me."

"Oh." Murphy's voice did sound queer. "Good."

"Anything to report?"

"No, just a check-in."

I thought I saw Bodie's eyes widen, and Doyle's head go up. But there wasn't any other visible reaction, so I decided I was imagining things.

"Fine," Bodie said. "Three seven out."

"Six two out."

I was in the middle of folding my clothes downstairs when Doyle called to me.

"Rachel! Come on, we've got to go in to Headquarters, Cowley wants to see us."

"In a minute," I called back. "I'm in the middle of this."

"Now!" He sounded sharp and surprisingly emotional. "You don't tell the old man you'll be there in a minute."

At the sound of his voice, I dropped my work and ran upstairs. Doyle handed me my sandals, and Theo too.

"Bodie's got your purse. He's already in the car. Let's go."

They both looked grim. In the car, I huddled into the back. "What's wrong?"

Doyle's voice sounded gentle again. "We don't know yet."

Mr. Cowley didn't look unhappy. Mr. Cowley looked dangerous. He gestured for us to sit, but when he spoke, he sounded like a man working very hard to keep his temper and his control.

"I understand that you and Miss Brandon had become friendly."

"Yes, sir."

He nodded. "I regret to have to inform you of Miss Brandon's death."

Suddenly it all made sense. Murphy's "Is our Yank all right"--had Wolfgang gotten to me and they didn't know it--the looks I had seen, the files, Wolfgang... "He's killed her."

"Yes."

"Like he killed that Morland girl?"

He looked over my head at the twins, as if he were asking for confirmation on something, and then he nodded once more as he turned his attention back to me. "Yes. In about the same way."

Sallie's voice replayed in my head, over and over again. I had a horrible feeling that I was going to be sick, or worse, that I was going to have hysterics. There wasn't time to do either, not really, not and keep myself rational. I put both of my horrors back in the back of my mind, and turned them off. I clenched my hands till I felt the ragged edges of my bitten nails digging into my palms.

Something almost sympathetic showed in his dark eyes, and Mr. Cowley asked, "Do you want to change your mind?"

I shook my head fiercely, trying to indicate my feelings because I didn't trust my voice.

He sighed. "All right, then. Another car from the pool, another address--you might as well wait in the squadroom until things are settled."

Another dismissal. I got wearily up from the chair, started for the door that Bodie held open--and stopped. It was that voice again, that breathy soprano.

"Look," said the woman, "I said I ran into a door. Now don't give me any of your bloody cheek--"

'Don't give me any of your bloody cheek'... 'Don't give me any of your bloody cheek, let me speak to Paul'... I was half aware of Ray starting to touch my shoulder, and of Bodie stopping him.

Bodie said softly, "What is it?"

"That voice, I know it--but I can't--"

"Where did you meet her?"

"I didn't, I only heard her--voice--" Couldn't be the same woman, couldn't be.

"That's Desayna Stewart. She's one of the secretaries."

"Desayna?" I was very close to something I knew I didn't want to hear, but I said, "Her name can't be Desayna."

"D-e-s-e-i-g-n-e. Been here about six months."

I was shaking my head. "It's too unusual, there can't be two of them in London--" I looked into his patient navy-blue eyes, hearing the edge of something like hysterics in my voice, because something terrible was beginning to make a lot of sense to me. "There was a woman who called Paul, three or four times a week about two months ago. She told me once 'Don't give me any of your bloody cheek, let me talk to Paul'--she sounded just the same now, just exactly like--I was jealous enough to spit, and Paul laughed, like he was flattered, like-- He said, 'That's just Desayna. She's my research assistant.' He laughed again, as if something was funny. His research assistant--"

Doyle scooted out past me, running down the hall.

I went on staring into those blue eyes that never gave anything away, never told me anything. "It's like in the books, isn't it? There was a leak, and that's how he could find Sallie, and that's why-- And if I'd thought about it, I might have been able to put it together, and Sallie wouldn't have--"

"Belt up," Bodie said, in a voice with all the force of a blow.

I shuddered. His hands came down on my shoulders, gripping with enough pressure I knew I'd have a bruise or two come morning.

"He might have gotten to her anyway. He might have gotten to you instead. Might doesn't help a bloody thing. It's cold comfort, but if you go on, all you'll do is drive yourself insane." He took a long slow breath, his eyes never leaving mine. "So belt up. Right?"

I took a shaky breath myself. "Right."

He smiled. "You did find her for us. We'd have had a long hard pull to track her down." He reached up and brushed the hair back from my face once more, leisurely, comfortingly.

A smile was impossible, but I managed a nod.

Doyle darted back in, with a thin file in hand.

"Got it," he said. "Nothing in her background to show, sir. Nothing at all in her background, might as well be blank paper."

Mr. Cowley's cool shuttered face looked almost animated. His eyes, at least, shifted back and forth, the lighting in the office changing their color from hazel to black. "If she's in contact with him--Miss McGregor, are you certain that this is the same voice?"

"Oh, yes, sir." I put all the conviction that I could muster into my voice. There was a possibility that I could be wrong--I had been, once. But it was the words and the voice this time. No, I wasn't wrong.

"Good." He said nothing more than that, but it was high praise. He looked like Wolfgang was already in his grasp. Then he put his glasses on, and riffled through a sheaf of paper on his desk. On a neat small square of paper that looked as if it had been cut expressly for this purpose, he wrote something in an almost schoolboy precise hand and gave it to Ray.

Ray frowned. "It's fairly as far out as the first place."

"I am aware of that, Doyle." The Scots burr was missing, the tone the kind of deceptive mildness that could send a wise person running for the hills. Ray didn't run, but he did shut up.

The new car was a mid-size dark green of English make, but getting into it and to the new address was all a blur. At the house, we sat and waited until Murphy's all-clear came through on the R/T, then Ray parked in the garage and Bodie hustled

me inside. It was a two-story house somewhere on the outskirts of northern London, and that was all I knew about it.

I was deposited in the kitchen, and then they went off to rattle systematically through the house, as if Murphy's OK wasn't good enough anymore.

I set Theo down on the table and stared dazedly around the room. Someone had folded the rest of the clean clothes and placed them neatly on the counter. There was a bag of groceries on the kitchen table, and next to them, the pan of cinnamon rolls, covered with plastic wrap. There were two missing.

Reaction hit me. CI5 had quickly and quietly moved us, and the movers had paused to swipe two cinnamon rolls. I started to laugh.

Bodie and Doyle were there all-of-a-sudden, holstering their guns, glancing at each other and then at me. I tapped the pan, said, "Can you arrest a CI5 man for stealing two rolls?" and went off into more hysterical giggles.

There was almost a grin on Doyle's face, but Bodie was staring at me, narrow-eyed and wary. He had a right to be wary, I suppose, because I heard the giggles change.

The next thing I knew, tears were spilling down my face. I was sobbing in a way I didn't very often--the kind of crying that shakes you, that tears at you in tiny explosive rips. All this time I'd coped, and now, and in front of them--

One of them sat down beside me. He put a hand on my shoulder, and I knew by the feel of the hand, the slender fingers, the simple fact that he did touch me, that it was Doyle. "It's all right, luv. Go on and cry. You've earned it."

I cried.

When I finally trickled off into hiccups, Doyle gave me a handkerchief. I wiped my eyes and blew my nose, knowing I looked grotesque.

"Here," said Bodie; he shoved a glass into my hand.

Scotch again. I was beginning to acquire a taste for the stuff. I took a couple of swallows, noting in some corner in my mind that it pointed out the difference in them, that Doyle would recognize, or at least notice, that I needed some kind of physical contact, and Bodie would hand me something to take my mind off the problem.

I looked up at Bodie, who had just eased himself into the chair across from me. For one of the few times since I'd met him, his look of cynical amusement was gone.

"Promise me something," I said.

"What?"

"Promise me that if he gets that close to me, you'll shoot me before he touches me."

A strange look went across the movie-star handsome face, something in the blue eyes that made it seem as if he were looking through me into some

hellish memory. Then he looked back at me, nodded, and said, "I will." He said it like a vow, hard and flat, so that it hung like something heavy and solid in the air. And I'd told myself this man was cold?! After a moment, he glanced away; when he looked at me again, he had the usual shut-off expression back, and he gave me a parody of the forced-cheerful smile Ray used so easily.

"After all," he said, "what are friends for? You'd do the same for me, wouldn't you, Yank?"

"It's not the same thing," I protested. "I don't even know how to shoot a gun. I've held one once, but that was almost ten years ago." I have a friend who's a good shot, but I don't like guns.

Now Ray Doyle interrupted. "No time like the present, eh?" He drew his gun--it was every bit as big as my hands--unloaded it, and handed it to me. "That's a Walther PPK. An automatic."

"Marksman's gun," added Bodie, with his black lashes half-shadowing his eyes and the irritating cynical amusement twisting his mouth slightly. "Use a Yank gun m'self."

"All right, Sunshine, I'm handling this."

Bodie grinned, cocky and sardonic. I clenched my hands on Ray's gun and gritted my teeth as Bodie leaned back and said, "All ears, aren't we, Yank?"

Ray adjusted my nervous grip on the gun butt, looked at me, and said, "Got such beautiful manners, doesn't 'e?" He smiled, taking all the stiffness out of my spine and I smiled in return. "What you're going to learn," he went on briskly, "is the approved Metro stance for aiming and firing a handgun. Nothing fancy. No, both hands, luv--you're little enough you need the balance."

Considering that I'm five-foot-eight and haven't weighed under a hundred in fifty since I was in high school, that had me gaping. On the other hand, Ray had a couple of inches on me and a lot more muscle--and Bodie was bigger than that!--so maybe I did look small to him.

"Usually you'll put a clip in, but we're dry-firing at the moment. Right hand on the gun, chamber around with the left--what you call cocking it--then left hand to balance right-- Sight along the gun barrel as if it was your finger, bring the gun up a bit farther than needed, then down to sight. Don't lock you elbows. The recoil'll do you some damage. If I could, I'd let you try a target--"

"You mean I can't pick out a patriotic V.R. on the far wall?"

Bodie snorted. "The old man's not so under-standing as Mrs. Hudson, Yank."

Ray frowned at him. "Here, stand up a bit." Stepping behind me, he slid his arms around me, slipping his long slim fingers over mine. "Brace your feet apart--- Farther than that. Good. Now, all your flick and telly detectives shoot for the head, or shoulder, or leg. Forget that. You want to stop 'im, not play Modesty Blaise. So you're going to aim for the largest target--the torso."

"Hell, this thing could stop an elephant!"

Ray's long arms felt warm and secure; I've always enjoyed being held. I shifted my weight back, resting against him while I tilted my head back and looked up. He smiled at me as if he knew exactly what I was doing. The arms tightened a bit.

"Maybe, but I dunno where we'll find you an elephant in this end of London to try it on, luv." He rubbed my left arm. "How's the arm?"

"A lot better."

"Good. Let's run through it again--clip in," he pantomimed, "chamber around with left hand, gun in right, get your left hand back on the gun--right. Ready?"

I nodded. He rubbed my arm gently.

"Right. Now, stand easy, relax your elbows-- good-- Take a deep breath, hold it, and then squeeze, don't pull, the trigger."

I tried to oblige, and he said, "Beautiful, luv, just beautiful."

The weapon both fascinated and repelled me. I'm a pacifist by conviction--but I wanted to shoot that gun. "Can I really try a target?"

"Why not?" He took the Walther back. "I'll show you how to clean it. Not that you'll have to, but as long as I've got it out, it won't hurt."

The fascinating thing was watching those long slender artist's hands competently disemboweling his nasty toy. He knew it so well he almost didn't have to look at it. He took the weapon apart with the grace he seemed to bring to everything.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Bodie shift, and glanced over at him in reflex. He was sitting sideways in his chair, with his feet propped up on a second chair and his back braced against the wall. As I watched, he folded his arms and rested one elbow on the back of his chair. His face: pretty-boy eyes, sensual mouth, and all, looked--warm, relaxed, indulgent. When he watched Ray's absorption, he lost all the shut-away arrogance.

His head turned abruptly, and he met my eyes square-on. I felt caught, somehow; I couldn't look away from his intent reflective eyes. If only he'd grin... But he didn't. I squirmed uneasily in my chair, then looked at Ray, and then finally, reluctantly, looked at Bodie again. He still was watching me. I wet my lower lip nervously with the tip of my tongue, and he shifted again, nothing more than moving one arm onto the table, so that his fingers were a bare two inches from mine. And he went on studying me, like a cat, like a--soldier surveying new territory. The eyes--if only he would grin, or make one of his usual sarcastic comments-- But he didn't. I felt a shiver of something slide up my back, and then I knew all at once why Bodie made me nervous. I looked back at Ray, who was still concentrating on his work.

A finger slid quietly across the back of my hand, curving under my palm and stroking along the tiny lines like a thoughtful fortune-teller. I looked at him again, and this time I saw the hint of a smile soften his mouth and put the devil into his eyes.

Metal clicked against metal, and Bodie's hand drew away as Ray began to reassemble his gun. I thanked God my luck still held--and I carefully did not look at Bodie's face.

Ray polished the barrel once more, then holstered the gun, spread his hands, and smiled. "There. Well, mate," and he grinned at Bodie as if something was vastly amusing. "Think you should give it a try with her?"

I looked at Bodie, and Bodie looked at me. After a moment, he pushed in the second chair with a boot toe and stood up. Lord, he looked big when he tried.

As he came around the table toward me, I got to my feet. I felt less threatened--and he wasn't even trying to be threatening. Half an arm's-length away, he reached inside his jacket and hauled out his gun. It wasn't all that much larger than Ray's Walther, but it looked larger. He took out the bullets, set them on the table, and handed me the revolver.

"Like I said, a Smith and Wesson .357. I'm not the marksman our Ray is. I just try t'stop 'em." Quickly and expertly he showed me how the revolver differed from the automatic.

Then the moment I'd been half-dreading arrived.

"All right, Yank, let's see you give it a try, eh?"

He wasn't going to touch me. I should have expected... Relief and disappointment slipped through me. Then I tried to balance myself in the stance Ray'd shown me. The gun felt awkward and top-heavy.

In two quick steps, Bodie moved up behind me, so close I could feel his body's warmth. "Won't do at all. Here." Then, to my surprise, he put his arms around me, correcting my grip. "You'll just lose the top of your thumb that way. This is a revolver, not an automatic. Ray told you to stand easy, he did. Get your legs a little farther apart, there, luv. That's better, eh? Now relax."

Relax, hell. Bodie was so close the sensation nearly stopped my breathing. I found myself leaning forward to keep from touching him. Then his left arm moved, easing around my waist, and he drew me back against him until he was as much a support as a guide. Not roughly, just--firmly.

Startled, I put my left hand over his. He rubbed his thumb against my palm, and I put my hand back on the gun where it belonged. His stayed on my waist, with the fingers splayed out over my hip, intimate and somehow protective, for a half-minute or so, before he shifted back to correct my grip one more time.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ray perched on the kitchen table, hands in his back pockets, lips pursed, and his eyes sparkling.

Demonstration concluded, Bodie rested his hand on my hip a fraction of a second before stepping away. "Well, Ray, you're the teacher here-- Think she ought to dry-fire a bit?"

Ray pulled a piece of chalk from somewhere and drew an 'X' on the kitchen wall. "Wouldn't hurt, it wouldn't. Go on, Rachel."

In any other circumstances, I would have been embarrassed. Here, I couldn't be. After fifteen minutes or so, my hands dragged and the gun felt deadweight. A hand on my shoulder stopped me--Ray leaned over me and took the gun away.

"That'll do. Isn't your arm sore enough already? Give it a rest, luv."

I sat wearily down at the table. Bodie put a pill in my left hand and a glass of water in my right. I opened my mouth to make a usual smart crack about protectors, looked into his eyes, and--didn't. I took the pill.

The idea jumped into my head like Athena bursting out of Zeus' skull. (Or was it Minerva and Jupiter? I never could keep the Greeks and Romans straight.) I acted on it before I'd completely considered it, like usual.

"Mr. Cowley's likely to give me another double, isn't he?" I looked up quickly, to catch the immediate reactions. Bodie's eyes widened, he leaned forward, and happy he did not look. Ray glanced at his partner, frowned, and glanced back at me.

"Second-guessing George doesn't do much more 'n give you a headache, Rachel," Ray said finally. "So why d'you ask, eh?"

Bodie was looking forbidding, like he already knew what I had in mind.

Belligerency would probably equate to them as hysterics. So had to sound reasonable and calm. "I don't want another double. If there're going to be risks, I'd rather take them."

"Do you think that maybe we'd like to keep you alive?" Ray sounded controlled.

"I don't want someone else like Sallie. I couldn't handle it."

"Once the old man makes up his mind, luv, you can't change it."

Here went nothing. "Then you'll just have to tell him not to make up his mind. I mean this, Ray, I'm serious. If he tries to give me another double, I'll walk." While they were dumbfounded, either by my effrontery or my stupidity, I departed in hasty dignity. Leave 'em with their mouths open--best offense on the field.

Nightmares aren't a thing I consciously cultivate. They simply arrive when I least want them. Up to now, I'd wake up from one, get up, and go off to find Ray, who would make me tea and tell me tales about the East End of London, or Bodie's experiences in Africa. Not that I believed them, mind you. I knew better.

But Ray was still angry. Once he'd realized I had made up my mind, I'd gotten the full London bobby lecture on not behaving like a good citizen--and for all his sweet nature, I found out he could

read the riot act with the best of them.

I was adamant. He calmed down. But he had gone off to bed without a cheerful "Goodnight," and I couldn't quite face him yet.

I lay back down and tried to sleep. The room was at the top of the stairs, one of two bedrooms on the top floor. Ray slept in the downstairs bedroom, Bodie in the room next to mine. I couldn't hear anything except the wind outside, couldn't see anything except the three-dimensional shadows that my eyes insisted were real objects. At least I could go sit in the kitchen. If I made myself a pot of tea, Ray might wake up of his own accord, and then he most likely wouldn't be angry. Bodie, after all, was the one who held grudges.

My robe was almost too thin for the sudden sweat from my nightmare. The wooden floor cooled my feet. I slipped down the stairs in the dark, feeling the way. On the bottom step, I lost my footing and caught my balance on the banister. A line of moonlight drew a diagonal through the open kitchen door from the stairs to the front room, slanting across the old-fashioned couch. As I tried to get my bearings, a noise from the front room startled me and I swung around.

Bodie was sitting up on the couch, with his huge bloody gun pointed at my chest.

Stepping back, I said an obscene three-word-phrase I rarely used, at the same time that he said my name. For a moment, I was amazed that he would use my name and then I was simply amazed. "Will you point that damn thing somewhere else? It might go off."

He did whatever it was that kept the gun from firing and slid it back into the holster. "What are you doing up? You're supposed to be asleep."

All my pent-up nervousness won. "I was lonely. I was looking for some company," I said rudely, and was almost immediately ashamed of my rudeness.

His face went hard a moment. Then, suddenly, it blanked, to be replaced by the usual cynical half-smile. "Well, you've found your company, haven't you? Want some tea, Yank?"

"My name's not Yank," I replied automatically. "And it's not your turn to make tea." He would decide to be nice when I'd just been nasty.

"You look all in, luv." He got up and sauntered over to stare down at me. After a moment, he put a hand lightly against my shoulder and gave me a gentle shove. "G'on in the kitchen. I'll make tea."

While he moved around the kitchen, I sat at the table in robe, pajamas, bare feet, and imbecility, wishing I'd stayed upstairs. I fiddled with my grad school class ring, slipping it onto each of my fingers in turn, rolling it back and forth across the table, and tossing it into the air once or twice. Bodie brought the teapot over; he stood and watched me with the ring until I tossed it in the air the third time. Then he reached out--he was still faster than I was--and caught it.

"Drive me off my nut to watch you fidget," he

said, handing it back to me. "Now, put it on and leave it, eh?" His fingers were warm from the china.

I put the ring on and left it. He poured me tea, and I noticed, all of a sudden, the white sleeve and cuff. "You're not wearing your jacket!"

His eyebrows arched. After a swallow of his tea, he replied, "It does come off."

"Oh? I thought maybe it was sewn on."

My answer was a dirty look and a "Cute, Yank. Real bloody cute." He hesitated, then added, "I wear a jacket because I'm cold most of the time."

"Cold? In London, in July? And an unusually hot July, I might add."

Bodie smiled, a sudden flash of honest amusement, and said, "Not nearly so hot as it is in Angola, innit?"

"I wouldn't know. I've never been there. You have?"

The eyebrows quirked again, and he looked at me with sardonic amusement and some patience. "You mean to say my mate's not been talking about me? Not like Doyle."

"Well--he did, I guess. But I thought he was just--telling me stories to-- Oh, you know."

"Hmmm." He finished his tea. "Guess I do."

"You really were in Angola? You were a mercenary?"

He refilled the teacups before looking over at me. I could almost see him drawing into himself like a snail. "Yeah, I was."

"Vicki will never believe me when I tell her I actually met a mercenary!"

Bodie blinked. Then he said dryly, "It's not the kind of thing most people boast about, luv."

"Oh, Vicki will love it. I think it's fascinating--" Dear Lord, I sounded fatuous. "It must have been a hard life--" And I winced, because that was worse. I tamped down hard on all the questions I wanted to ask. I wasn't totally insensitive.

"I've done easier." He paused, then said in a resigned tone, "Go on, Yank, I can see all the questions perking around in your head."

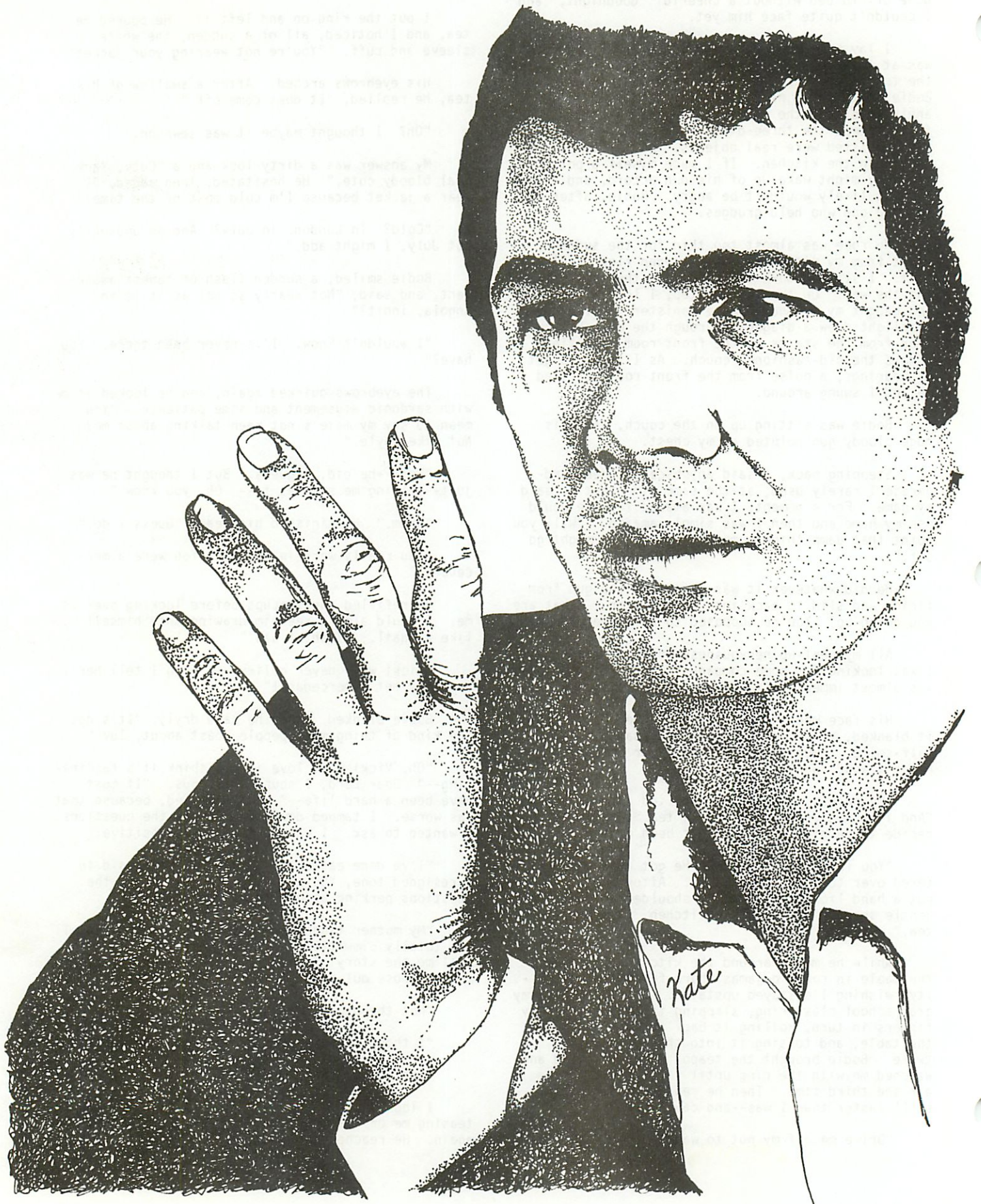
"My mother taught me manners." Did he think I was totally dimwitted? "If you really wanted to tell me the story of your life, you would. I can keep my nose out of other people's business."

"Not the usual reaction, Yank."

"I thought you'd already decided I was weird."

"Not weird, Yank. Just different."

I looked down at my cup, not sure if he was teasing me or not, and the damn hair fell in my face again. He reached out, brushed it back with gentle



fingers. I could feel the--pleasure--sliding down the back of my neck, all the way to the base of my spine. I shivered. I liked the way his hands felt on my skin.

Bodie pulled his hand back as if I'd burnt him. He drew away, drew himself up, looking twice as tall and three times as cold as normal.

"What's wrong?" I said.

His words sounded stiff and clipped. "I didn't mean to frighten you."

"Frighten me?" Was that his interpretation? He was touchy. "That's not the word I'd use."

In the same hard voice, he said, "Repulsed? Disgusted?"

After all the work I'd been doing to keep him from seeing how much I was attracted, it was funny. I laughed, and almost immediately put a hand over my mouth to stop myself.

Bodie moved. He half-stood before I put a hand out, and then he looked from my hand to my face suspiciously.

"Wait, Bodie, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to-- It's just that you're so wrong, it's not that at all, you don't understand. You're British--you just don't understand."

He sat back down, folded his arms, and studied me as if he did not intend to be put off. "Explain it to me, eh?"

My first attempt died in a choked stammer. My second was worse; looking at him made the explanation impossible. I looked helplessly around myself, trying to find inspiration somewhere, and finally got up to go stand by the stove, putting as much distance between us as I dared. "You--could try it again and see what happened," I offered tentatively.

Bodie leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. "You say I'm British and we don't understand one another," he said thoughtfully. "But where I was raised, that'd be called a come-on."

I stared back down at my class ring, twisting it around my finger. "Maybe there's less difference than I thought. Where I grew up, they'd call it a come-on."

Another pause. My mouth was dry and my throat hurt. I heard his chair scrape across the linoleum, and then his boots against the floor. I saw the boots in front of me. Then a hand tilted my head up, and I looked in his grave reserved face as his other hand brushed the hair back and tucked it behind my ears.

This time I managed a wavering smile. "Still think I'm scared?" My attempt at lightness came out like a squeak.

Bodie leaned over and kissed me, lightly at first, until I put my hands on his shoulders to get them away from being a barrier. I responded. After a moment, one of his hands settled at the small of my back, pulling me closer, supporting me, and I could feel the tension in his muscles before he

sighed and drew back.

"You said you wanted company. Still do?" he said, in a low purr.

"What did you have in mind?"

This time he wasn't smiling. "Anything you want. If what you want's a pair of arms to keep the nightmares away, you've got it. If you want more than that..." He shrugged.

I fidgeted. It took me a minute before I realized that I was fidgeting with his shirt buttons; then I jerked my hands away and cleared my throat. "I never thought that the two were mutually exclusive."

"They're not." He wasn't going to give me any help.

Getting past the constriction in my throat, I said, "All right, then. Company would be--I mean--oh, hell! I'd like that, Bodie."

His face relaxed, and he gave me that heart-stopping smile I'd only seen once before. About the next thing I was aware of was being back in the bedroom at the top of the stairs, and no longer having my clothes between us. For a moment, I was worried that he'd prove a different cliché true: that soldiers are fast and unsubtle. I needn't have worried. He tucked me in before he turned out the lights, and the first thing he did after lying down beside me was to turn, slip his arms around me, and rock me as if I were a child. As if he liked to touch me. He was so slow and patient and gentle that I was ashamed of myself for being surprised.

Afterward, he settled me next to him and draped an arm over my waist while I snuggled my head into the hollow of his shoulder. In this close contact, it would have been impossible not to notice the scars. There were five, long parallel furrows from left shoulder to right hip. I traced one, curious; he stiffened; I took my hand away.

"Don't tell me," I said, "you ran into a door, huh?"

"Actually, was the landlord's cat, Yank." But there was a purr of relaxed laughter in his voice, and he shifted so that one of my legs was resting on top of his.

"Must've been one monster of a cat." Change subject. "And will you stop calling me Yank? Of all the insensitive times to call me that, this takes the absolute cake. You complained about Mac, but really--"

"Didn't either," he said lazily. "Said it doesn't suit you, it doesn't. Not female enough."

"Neither does 'Shelley.' And since when is Yank female-sounding? You could try Rachel. It is my name, after all."

I heard him sigh, and the hand on my back massaged my tense muscles. "I guess it's just too close to Ray. Bothers me somehow, Duchess." He nuzzled the side of my throat.

"Duchess!" I said. Was there no end to the

things this man could come up with?

"Regal way you haul yourself up and lecture at me," he said. "Fair shaking in me boots, I am. Insulted again?"

"Well, no, I--" Sheepishly, I admitted, "I rather like it."

Bodie laughed, then kissed my forehead. "Right, Duchess."

I ran a hand down his chest, and was fascinated by those scars again. Bodie took my hand and put it against his shoulder.

"Sorry," I said.

"No problem." He rubbed my back again, then said, quick and clipped, "Was a lioness."

"What?"

"In South Africa. Lioness attacked me."

I had a sudden vivid picture compounded from years of B-grade safari movies and PBS documentaries. "Oh, my God." I tightened the hand on his shoulder, wondering if he were really there or simply a figment of my imagination. "Well, you're still in one piece, apparently. It must have--" I gave it up and shook my head.

"Had a friend who was a bloody good shot with a rifle." Another pause. "Don't think about it anymore. But people always ask questions."

An absurd desire to comfort him overwhelmed me. I kissed him, and felt his mouth stretch into a smile. I rubbed the small of his back with my fingertips. His skin rippled smooth and warm and supple under my hand as his muscles relaxed. Bodie sighed, sounding contented. Then he pillowed my head on his arm and shifted my hips closer to his before brushing my hair back again and kissing me as if I were a child he was putting to bed.

"Go to sleep, Duchess," he said. "It's fair on three a.m."

It worked. I slept without any bad dreams.

Bodie was awake before I was. When I rolled over, his eyes were half-open. I leaned across him to check the time. Eight-thirty.

An arm curved up and around my waist, and Bodie drew me down on top of him. "Guten morgen, Duchess."

"Guten tag to you," I said. "And before you ask--I don't speak German, Bodie." Starsky and Hutch regardless, it still felt strange to call him by his last name.

He looked at me a second before saying, "I'm pleased to see you're not trying my Christian names." As if he were trying to be light about it. "Most of the birds I chat up do fair till the morning after, and then they're always hinting around about which of my names I like."

"And you don't like any of them."

"Don't like the people I was named for." He slid an arm under his head and rested the other hand on the small of my back. I shifted against the hand, and he stroked me almost absently.

I filed this one under the mental category 'Bodie: weird prejudices of,' and shrugged at him. "No problem. After all, the only reason you give a cat a name is to have something to call it by when it doesn't answer, and I guess you're the closest thing to a cat I've come across here." Oh-oh. 'Come across' doesn't mean the same thing in London that it does in the Midwest. Luckily he hadn't seemed to notice my Freudian slip. His eyes were nearly crossed trying to make some sense out of my words. With that distracting him, I said, "Let me up, babe, it's my turn to make breakfast." He let go, still looking baffled and absorbed. I got my robe and went to brush my hair.

'Most of the birds I chat up'--was that the category I fit into? I dragged the brush through my hair. If that was all, he'd waited long enough to try. Or maybe he wasn't capable of talking about it in any other way? Or... I put the brush down and sighed.

Bodie's arms went around my waist and he rested his chin on my head, looking into the mirror at me. "Actually, Duchess, you come across just fine, you do."

I groaned and covered my eyes. "Oh, damn. I knew you were too quick on the uptake."

He chuckled and kissed the back of my neck. Then, more gently, he said, "You all right, luv?"

"Fine." So maybe he hadn't 'chatted me up.'

His face had that half-smiling, the world-amuses-Us expression again. Goaded beyond safe limits, I told him, "I swear, one of these days you'll look at me like that once too damned often and I'll clean your clock for it!"

"Like what?" He sounded honestly confused.

"Canary feathers."

Bodie laughed. Full-throated laughter. He put his cheek against my hair, still laughing, and tightened his grip on me until I almost couldn't breathe.

"It's not that funny," I protested.

"Oh, but 'tis, luv--" Still chuckling, he turned me to face him, and went on to say, "It's this bloody mug of mine, Duchess, got me into more trouble since I was a kid. Can't tell you the numbers of times I've been called up for orders 'cos someone didn't like my face, they didn't."

"Hmmm. In that case, then, you can apologize by letting me have the shower first." I prodded him in the chest with a finger, and he let me loose.

"Just leave some hot water, eh?"

"I'll think about it," I told him grandly, before grabbing my clothes and hustling downstairs.

While I was combing my hair out, I heard my name. More correctly, I heard Bodie say 'the Duchess.' I cracked the bathroom door and heard Doyle answer.

"She's not only a 'brave little bird,' Sunshine, she's a nice young woman."

"Didn't say she wasn't, did I?" Bodie returned. He sounded reserved again.

A long pause. Ray said, in a tone that reeked of 'I am trying to be casual,' "Be a shame if she got hurt, wouldn't it?"

"Look, mate, give 'er credit-- She's a big girl, she is, came all the way to London without her mum." The sarcasm came through clearly.

"All I'm saying--"

"Ray, I know bloody well what you're saying. Give it a rest, will you? I know she's a nice young woman. I didn't bloody get her to come across 'cos I was hard-up." Bodie sounded like a patient adult explaining the facts of life to a not-too-bright twelve-year-old.

"I hope not, mate."

At that point, they both faded off into brooding silence, and I belatedly felt guilt at eavesdropping. I turned the lavatory tap on hard a minute while I dressed, then shut it off and wandered out.

"Hallo, Duchess," Bodie said promptly. He had his back to me, but half-turned so that I could see the corner of his smile. "Been wondering when you were going to make an appearance. Haven't heard the shower for quite a bit."

How more clearly could he say 'I know you were listening?' I flushed, then stammered something patently absurd about not wanting to intrude on their conversation. Uh-huh. Sure.

Ray shoved a chair out with his foot. "Sit down and eat something, eh? You don't want to take any notice of Bodie, Duchess, he's just--nasty, he is." He said it lightly, teasing, and Bodie reacted with a snort and a grin. Ray snickered in turn and went on, "You had a late night, luv, so I took the liberty of making you breakfast."

So he was saying he wasn't upset about my stubbornness or my sleeping with Bodie.

In the middle of breakfast, it occurred to me that if they both knew I had been listening, then Bodie intended for me to hear his last crack, and Ray intended for me to hear him warn Bodie. So they both meant me to understand that they weren't treating this casually? It made a kind of sense.

Later that morning, though, they confirmed it. Bodie went to the shower, and Ray sat in the front room, in the chair, making notes to himself out of the files. I came in and curled up on the couch, feeling as if I'd had twelve hours too little sleep.

Ray grinned at me. "Tired. Should've stayed in bed, Rachel."

"You're both up and you seem to get less sleep than I do."

"Ah, but we're used to it, aren't we? You're a civilian."

"I'm a nurse. And I was an assistant before that, and sometime in there I was a college student." The muscles in my shoulders felt knotted. I shrugged, trying to loosen them.

"Here," he said, unhurriedly laying down his papers and files. "You want to lie flat on the sofa, Duchess, and I'll work over your shoulders."

His strong fingers bit into the muscles, and then dissected them. After about fifteen minutes, I drifted into the twilight zone, not really aware of anything.

"You feeling all right?"

"Hmm? Mmm-hmm. Why?"

"Nothing. Just wanted to be sure you were all right." He shifted his hands, kneading expertly.

"You mean about last night? He didn't hurt me, Ray."

"Of course he didn't." Ray sounded shocked. "He wouldn't. Isn't at all what I meant, luv."

I rolled over and stared up at him. "I know what you meant, Ray." Subtlety had completely missed the mark. So I'd have to try being a bit blunter. "Thanks--for worrying about me, I mean. but--really, I'm all right."

"All I wanted to know," he said gently. "Just you stretch out here and rest a bit. Do you good."

I nodded. Drifting back off, I heard someone come into the room, and Ray shifted in his chair.

"She's asleep, Bodie."

Bodie grunted. "Worn-out, most likely. Poor kid--too bloody innocent for all of this..." His fingers brushed the hair back from my face.

I went off to sleep.

Bodie and Doyle sat over the coffeetable, playing 'Mastermind.' I looked up from my book every now and then to watch them--they could be so funny when they snapped at each other.

Their radios went off again, and they looked at each other.

"Your turn," said Bodie.

"Thanks, mate." Doyle pulled out his R/T. "Four-five."

Murphy's voice again. "Six--two. Alpha's just passed us. I'd look sharp, were I you."

Doyle cast his eyes up to heaven, then grinned ruefully at Bodie. The grin made his uptilted green eyes look even more faunlike. "'Kyou. Four-five

out." He put the thing away. "You're honored, Rachel. Cowley's coming to check on us."

"Has he got time for that?" I put my book down. "I'm not that important."

"All witnesses are important," Bodie said sternly. Then he softened again. "On the other hand, he may have some information for us, and it makes more sense to come here than to put it over the air or call us in."

"And besides," Doyle added, "he probably wants to be sure we won't be caught out by a sudden visitor. The day he stays safely in 'is office I shall take up embroidery."

Murphy's voice came muffled from Doyle's pocket. "Checkpoint one, four-five."

"Ah," said Bodie. "Better go and earn our pay."

Doyle held out a hand to me and obediently I took it, allowing myself to be drawn along like a child. He put me gently but firmly to the other side of the refrigerator, where I could peer around the corner but wasn't in direct line with the door. He and Bodie took positions on either side of the door and waited. They actually had their guns drawn, of all things, and when Mr. Cowley's big white car pulled up, Bodie put his thumb on the hammer of his revolver.

"Ah," he said, "got the Rover this time, has he."

The kitchen door opened onto a short stairway that led down to an outside door. The outer door opened, and Mr. Cowley's Scots burr came clearly up the stairs.

"I am pleased to see that the outside watch is alert."

Doyle and Bodie looked at each other, and then put the guns away. Doyle leaned over to open the kitchen door.

"Hallo, sir," he said.

"Doyle. Bodie...and Miss McGregor, I see." He glanced at the twins. "Behind the icebox?"

They exchanged a speaking look. Doyle answered. "Out of line of sight and fire, sir."

"Aye. Good. Shall we go into the front room?" He had a sheaf of paper with him, and now he held it up to riffle through it. "I have some information."

I tagged along. I knew I was probably not included in the invitation, but the hell with it.

All I got, though, was a raised eyebrow from Cowley and a glare from Doyle.

We all settled back around the coffeetable: me in one armchair, Bodie half-on, half-off the desk, Doyle in the other armchair, and Cowley on the sofa. He put his glasses on and opened a file.

"Deseigne Stewart," he read out. "Twenty-two,

no form, security checks clear. We did some checking with her coworkers in Records. Miss Stewart has picked up a boyfriend in the past few months. Apparently a rather rough young man; tends to leave her with black eyes once in a while. One of the other young ladies has seen the aforementioned gentleman. She identified Wolfgang positively from a photo." He looked at me over his glasses. "Miss McGregor, Wolfgang never--" pause here. I think he was trying to be delicate. "--struck you?"

"Beat me up? What do you think I-- No. Certainly not. I am not a punching bag."

He nodded. "It was a necessary question." Reading from his file again, he went on, "We have her address, and a tail has been assigned. Sooner or later, she will meet Wolfgang, and we can collect him." He looked at the twins. "In case of a problem, we will work out an escape plan. I believe another double will need to be assigned."

Oh-oh.

Doyle and Bodie glanced at each other, and then Doyle's eyes flicked to me. Cowley's eyes narrowed, but neither one of them said a word. Jerks.

I took my courage firmly in both hands and said all in one breath, "Idon'twantanotherdouble-sir."

"Eh?" he said.

I tried it once more, and Cowley straightened.

"I beg your pardon?" His voice dripped icicles.

"I-don't-want-another-double-sir," I said for the third time. His eyes drilled holes through me and out the back of the chair, but I clenched my hands in my lap and went on with it. "Sallie was enough, wasn't she?"

"Sallie Brandon was a trained field agent," said Cowley, still pinning me with the butterfly-impaling glare.

"And I'm not, I know that. But I do know how to take orders. I've been around doctors long enough. And I don't want someone else to die the way--Sallie--"

"Neither do I. Neither do I want you to die that way."

"I'm not too thrilled by the idea myself, Mr. Cowley. But if I'm the one being protected, then I ought to be the one to take the risk."

"And if I say otherwise?"

I took one more good deep breath. "Then I walk."

"How long do you think you would survive?"

"Well, we'd find out, wouldn't we?" said I.

He looked the twins over. "I assume you two knew of this?"

Bodie said, "She did tell us, sir."

"We've been attempting to convince her of the idiocy, Mr. Cowley," contributed Doyle.

Bodie added, "She's very--determined."

"I think the term you're looking for, Bodie," said Cowley, "is pigheaded." I got the benefit of his dark-iced glare again. "I could test your resolve, Rachel."

My knees felt like jelly. If he did, could I really go through with it? I'd have to, or look like Charlie Brown in drag. God, don't let him call my bluff.

"However," he continued, "I would lose you as a cooperative witness no matter what your decision in that case. And I would prefer to have you cooperative. I do not approve of this. I want you to be quite aware of that." He shifted his gaze to the file and shut it. "No double."

"Thank you, sir."

"You're welcome." He made it sound like an imprecation. "Now. If I could impose on you to make some tea for us?"

In other words, go away for a few minutes so he could talk to them in privacy. "Yes, sir," I said, and departed.

When I came back with tea and biscuits, and some cheese I'd scavenged from our supplies (Murphy wasn't bringing in groceries until tomorrow), Cowley seemed to be feeling affable. At least, we sat and chatted and drank tea as if it were a social visit.

Eventually, he looked at his watch. "Well. I must be going." He collected his coat and his files, and stood up. And then swung around to look at me. "Rachel."

"Yes?" The room felt a little cold suddenly.

"I expect you to do whatever Bodie and Doyle tell you to. That is understood, is it not?"

"Yes, Mr. Cowley."

"Good. I do not want to be told otherwise."

"Yes, Mr. Cowley."

He nodded, and removed his glasses. "Good day."

Bodie went to let him out. Doyle glanced at me, and then brought me a drink.

"Next time you plan to do that," he remarked, "let me phone your solicitor first. One should always have a will made before committing suicide. Makes it so much easier on the estate."

"Thanks."

Finally he grinned at me. "Was worth it, though, to see George look like a gaffed pike."

"Don't applaud, just throw money."

He laughed until Bodie came back in. Bodie demanded to know the joke, but on being told, only

raised his eyebrows at me.

"Don't be too pleased with yourself, luv. The old man remembers people who get above themselves with him."

That figured.

For the next two days, it rained off-and-on, the grey drizzle that is London and Great Britain at its worst: dull, dreary, and depressing. I heard myself getting snappish with my two pet gargoyles, and took to deliberate efforts of interaction in an attempt to keep from sounding like the Wicked Witch of the West. Just because they were forced to live with me didn't mean they had to suffer my foul moods.

I even tried to be cheerful and interested in the soccer game Ray turned on the second night, although I hate sports and televised games are a bore. He looked so intense, though, that I finally asked him if he loved soccer or if he had money riding on it.

His smoky-green eyes flicked to me, and then he grinned like a little boy with a hand full of cookie crumbs. "Got a fiver with Murphy on the spread."

"Uh-huh."

Bodie handed me a card, and I put it in the hand I already had. Nothing. This was the fifteenth hand of poker he'd played with me, and I was no better off this time than I had been the other fourteen.

"It," I told him, "is a damned good thing I'm not playing for money. You'd have my shirt!"

"Wouldn't fit me," he said lazily, before giving me an evil grin. "Besides, Duchess, I'm no fool--I'd be playing you for what was in the shirt, I would."

My hand went defensively to my buttons, and his grin widened. "They wouldn't fit you either."

"Oh," he purred, "they fit me just fine, luv."

Trading that kind of puns with Bodie? I was asking for it. Breathlessly, I added, "Besides, if you get it for free, why would you have to bet on it?"

Bodie's eyes slit like a cat playing with a mouse. "Oh, but even when you get it free, it's more fun to work for it a bit, eh?"

I looked helplessly over at Ray back in his chair and glancing from us to the soccer match as if he couldn't decide who was more fascinating. Ray smiled, and his eyes crinkled, and he shook his head.

"Sorry, luv," he said, "but this is one war you'll have to lose on your own."

I looked at my cards again, blinked, and said, "Call," and put them down.

Bodie, distracted, glanced down at the five

cards, then sat straight up and said, "What the bloody hell--".

"Three nines and two jacks," said I, trying to sound terribly innocent. "That's a good hand, isn't it?"

"I," he answered, "have been hustled."

"Beginner's luck," I told him.

"Yeah. That's what's so bloody rotten about it." He shrugged, then, and made a motion as if he were pushing an imaginary pot in my direction. "Another hand?"

"Why not? Ray?"

He scowled at the television and said, "Yeah?"

"Who's winning?"

"The wrong team."

"Way of the world," I said, trying to sound sophisticated and cynical. "You can't win, you can't break even, and you can't even quit the game."

Bodie looked sharply at me, and said, "Don't ever say that. Ever."

At the sudden menace, I pulled back. "I didn't mean anything by it, Bodie--"

"I know. That's why you shouldn't say it. And never believe it." He had that sharp tone of soldier-giving-orders, and the same look. Then he blanked again, the great stone face back once more, and said in a pseudo-cheerful tone, "Besides, our Ray's an idealist, and you wouldn't want to burst his illusions, would you?" Bodie stood up. "My turn to make tea. And Murphy brought lemons for yours, Duchess." He sauntered out.

Taken aback, I glanced over at Ray. "Ray, I was only being a little flippant--"

"Some things," he said, "it's best not to be flip about. And he's touchy."

"He was the one who said I was too innocent."

"Innocence," Ray said gently, "is a rare gift nowadays. We may think you're too innocent to live, but we still appreciate the trait. That sophisticated talk doesn't suit you, Rachel. And we don't treat it light." A cheer from the screen broke into the lecture, and he turned his attention back. "Ah, there we are, our side at last. About time, too, eh?"

"Maybe you'll win your bet after all," I said.

"Hope so. Murphy's usually right on these things. 'Is public-school background, you know.'"

"No, I didn't."

"Then don't tell 'im I told you. Likes to be one of us common people, 'e does."

Bodie entered in time to hear that last and snorted. "Anyone who climbs the way he does isn't common." He passed out tea gravely. "Who's winning

now, Sunshine?"

Ray started to explain whatever had happened while I drank my tea and let the discussion go right over my head. Their R/T's gave out with that weird signal and the conversation stopped. Ray gave Bodie a rueful glance, fiddled with his walkie-talkie, and said, "Four-five here."

The Scots burr on the other end was Mr. Cowley. "Target has been hit. Wolfgang has your location, four-five, and his position is unknown at this time. Get back to HQ. Use the alternate plan we discussed earlier. The motorcycle is in the cellar. Lookouts will be tagged for you, use route Echo. Understood?"

They looked grim again. "Understood," Ray said. "Four-five out."

"What's this alternate plan?" I put in.

Ray looked at Bodie, and Bodie looked at Ray, and then Ray looked at me. "You heard the old man about the motorcycle?"

I nodded.

"We're going to split up. One of us will take you on the bike, and the other will follow in the car. It's late enough that there'll be more maneuverability on the motorbike, and you'll be less likely to be noticed. Couple of punks out joy-riding, it'll look."

He glanced across at Bodie again. "Neither of us has leathers--guess it'll have to do, though. C'mon, Rachel, you'll have to get dark clothes on, and then we'll go and Sunshine here can follow--"

"Hold it," Bodie said, sounding argumentative. "What's this?"

"I've had more time on motorbikes than you."

"Not lately, you haven't. And it's your turn to play decoy."

Ray sighed, and dug in his pocket for a fifty-pence piece. He held it out. Bodie considered it.

"Heads," he said finally.

Ray nodded and tossed the coin deftly, caught it on the back of his hand, slapped the other hand over it, and took the hand away. "Damn."

Queen Elizabeth's profile stared up at us.

Bodie nodded. "Like the man said, Duchess--go change your clothes. As dark as you've got."

"All right, Bodie." I ran upstairs, found a pair of jeans and a dark pullover, and fumbled into them. A shout followed me.

"Get a jumper or a jacket on," Ray called. "It'll be damn cold with the wind."

I pulled out my other sweater; luckily it was dark grey. I buttoned it up as I ran downstairs, and came within two inches of cannonading directly into Ray.

He caught me by the shoulders and said, "Relax. Everything's going to be fine, Rachel."

I nodded. Bodie came into the kitchen, pulling on a pair of gloves. He had a helmet under his arm, and he held it out to me. After a moment, I took it.

"Y'know," I said, "I really don't like motorcycles. I've ridden one a time or two--and I never did feel comfortable."

He grinned at me suddenly. "Just think of it as an opportunity to hang on to me, luv."

Ray snorted. "I'll go out and rev up the car. You going out the alley?"

"Best, don't you think?"

"Yeah." Ray shoved his hands in his back pockets and frowned. Then he put a hand on my shoulder and kissed my forehead. "Go easy, eh, Sunshine?" he said to Bodie, before sliding out into the garage.

I glanced after him, and Bodie said, in a harsh voice, "Put the bloody helmet on, will you?"

"Sorry," I answered, and put it on.

He sighed. Then he helped me tuck my hair under the helmet edge. "Don't like to split up. We wouldn't, if the old man hadn't told us to."

"It's dangerous, isn't it?" I heard my voice shake, but I went on before I thought about it. "I don't know why it took me so long to realize the kind of danger I've put you two in--"

He turned to me, looking savage for the first time in a long time. "That's enough! Christ, spare me the bloody sacrificial routine! This is our job, we know all the risks, and we take 'em anyway. The last thing I need right now, Duchess, is to have you come emotional on me. I need to know that I can trust you to do what I tell you when I tell you--and if I can't, then we'll use another double and you'll take it, or--"

"Please, Bodie, I'm not trying to be difficult. If I didn't know you two, I wouldn't trust you, and it'd be different. What I mean is that I do know you, and I do trust you, and I don't like the fact that you might both get killed trying to keep me alive. I will do what you tell me. I'm not a moron-- But it doesn't make me feel any better to have you yell at me!" If I'd read his character right, then shouting back ought to stop him.

He stiffened. Then he relaxed. "No, I guess not. But let's drop this Christian-martyr routine, eh? I get enough breast-beating from Ray to put me right off it."

I nodded.

After an obvious hesitation, he stepped forward and put his arms around me. "It's going to be all right, Duchess. I know you're scared. So am I-- But Christ, girl, if you go faint on me now, I swear I'll never let you forget it!"

Muffled, I said into his shoulder, "I won't,

Bodie. I promise."

"Right. Let's go, then, before Doyle runs out of petrol."

Ray was thoroughly annoying the neighbors by idling the car at half-throttle. Under cover of the noise, Bodie wheeled the motorcycle out of the garage and motioned for me to hop on behind him. When I got my feet settled, he started it, and with a cough followed by a slow volcanic rumble, we rattled down the alley. Well, not an alley, exactly--more like a lane.

I buried my head in Bodie's back, trying not to dig the helmet into his shoulderblades, and hung on. At least I didn't have to be embarrassed that I was clinging to him.

A moment after that, a car moved in behind us, and blinked its headlights twice.

Bodie shouted over his shoulder at me, "That's our Ray. I'm going to gun it a bit, so hang on."

As if I'd do anything else.

Riding through the northern suburbs of London was an incredible experience. There were streets that went uphill and streets that went downhill and streets that couldn't make up their mind; as well as ones that imitated corkscrews and ones that started to go somewhere and then didn't. I was lost. Reminded me of the one time I'd attempted a drive through New York City. Never again. The worst was riding on a motorcycle behind Bodie--he handled the bike expertly, but when he said 'gun it,' he meant it.

From the suburbs we passed into an industrial section of London. Fools would have stayed far away from this area at this time of night. On the other hand, being wise, where were we?

An engine chugged to our right, and I turned my head in time to see a car-sans-headlights, resembling Mr. Cowley's white Rover--something like the British equivalent of an ORV or a four-wheeled drive jeep--scoot out of a side street. Ray's car horn screeched indignantly, and then brakes and tires squealed. For a minute or so, the two engines warred. Bodie revved the bike even higher and we skidded around a corner. I heard an explosion to our rear.

Bodie cocked his head as if listening. A thin black wire ran from his ear to his jacket pocket and I deduced an earphone connection to his R/T. He pulled the bike over to the curb and twisted to look round at me.

"Doing all right?"

My heart settled into a normal rate. I nodded. "Ray--"

"Man in the Rover had a shotgun. Missed the car, but Doyle punctured a tire, and we'll be on our own until he gets a chance to catch up. We have to try to stay on the route, or one of the alternates, so the old man has a guess as to our location."

"Wolfgang?" Stupid question.

"Yeah." Bodie's head lifted suddenly, and then I heard it as well.

That Rover's engine. Wide-open.

"Let's go, Duchess."

As the jeep rocketed around the corner, we skidded away. Its lights swept across us a moment, and then the driver killed the lights and the darkened vehicle came grunting down the street after us.

Bodie made a fast right, and then an almost immediate left. Two blocks down, he circled back and went left, right, and left in quick succession. Suddenly and sickeningly, a white ORV came hurtling around a corner and straight toward us.

The bike almost stood on end-- Bodie swore and twisted it into a narrow alley, and did another set of rapid turns.

I was hopelessly lost.

At the next corner, he hesitated.

The Rover turned into our street two blocks behind us.

Bodie turned right, then left, then swore again and wheeled us around again, going back the way we'd come. I began to get the uneasy feeling that we'd left the routes completely. Desayna's research had been thorough, apparently more thorough than they'd expected, or else we were very unlucky.

Wolfgang cut us off again.

With a groan of sheer desperation, Bodie went around a circle drive and turned right again.

Then the bike slewed to a grinding halt, nearly pitching me onto the pavement. The dull yellow light of a construction warning stabbed at my dark-adapted eyes, and in it I saw the piled rubble where someone had been tearing up the street.

"Okay, Duchess," Bodie said. "Hang on." He throttled down and threaded the motorcycle through the walkway arranged for any possible pedestrians. We came out on the other side of the construction, and I felt him tense as he revved the bike.

Then that damned Rover's engine sounded, coming--around the corner toward us?

"Bloody hell," he muttered, "not possible..." He tried to swing us around as the jeep's lights flashed across the street opening. We didn't make the turn. More pounds of metal and rubber than I wanted to think about landed on us. Bodie was a little bigger than I was; he took the brunt of the fall with one leg half-out as a brace. I heard him swear a third time. All I could manage was the yelp of pain and pure fright that got knocked out of me along with my wind.

The Rover made the corner and skidded to a halt some yards from us. With a grunt and an unfamiliar obscenity, Bodie heaved the motorcycle over. Then one big hand grabbed me and hauled me up on my feet. No conversation, just dragged me after him. Sharp pains shot down my left leg as I struggled to keep up.

A bullet narrowly missed us, chipping concrete from the pavement with a whine and the thunk of a small hammer. A second bullet cracked a warehouse window to our left. I got the hair out of my eyes in time to see that we were headed back toward the construction zone. And that we had been silhouetted in the Rover's headlights.

Bodie shoved me up against the wall, spun, and fired twice. The loud cracking explosions stung my ears. Darkness; the headlamps were out. Over the sound of shattering glass came the sound of Wolfgang laughing.

The entire bulk of Bodie's body sheltered and smothered me; blood oozed down my lower lip. The air smelt of Bodie, cordite, and gasoline. And Wolfgang's laughing echoed off the walls around us.

"You've found a clever one this time, Rachel." Paul's voice rippled across the space between us. I shivered. "Won't do any good, liebchen. But I'll make a deal with you. Come here to me now and I'll let your clever friend go. You'd like that, wouldn't you, sweetheart?"

Bodie put a hand none-too-gently in the small of my back. Mouth against my ear, he whispered, "Move it, Duchess. Now."

I moved in the direction indicated. Knowing it wouldn't be well received, I offered, "He might be telling the truth. He might let you--"

"Shut up," said Bodie.

I shut up. I also kept moving.

"Okay," came the mutter against my ear. "To your right and down. Where that gap is under the loading dock. Hop it, eh?"

"I'm trying," I told him.

"What's up? You been hurt?"

"I think so. When the bike fell--"

"Right." His grip shifted from my wrist to my waist. He put me into the space under the dock, then crawled in after me. "Get up against the wall, luv. And stay put."

It smelled like the inside of a garbage can. I obeyed orders, and sat rubbing my bruised thigh while I hoped fervently that what I was hearing wasn't rats.

Bodie dug his R/T out of his jacket pocket. "Three-seven to four-five."

Nothing.

"Four-five."

Still nothing.

"Four-five-- Ray, where the hell--"

"Four-five. Receiving you."

"About time," Bodie said, before going off into a line of rapid-fire cant in a low-pitched voice that carried maybe three inches before

blending into all the other vague night murmurs. Like sludge at the bottom of a lake.

Or in the bottom of this hole. If this had been Detroit, we'd've been mugged twenty times over.

At some point, Bodie gave Ray our address. It was no street I recognized, and then I knew how lost I was.

He finished off with instructions to call Cowley and tell him our position. Putting the radio away, he crawled hands-and-knees to where I was.

"Now what?" I asked.

"Now we wait for Doyle. And the old man. How's your leg?"

"Bruised. I may have pulled a muscle but don't quote me."

"I shan't." He settled down next to me.

There was no sound from outside. Felt as if we'd walked into the Twilight Zone.

"You know anything about bullet wounds?" he said.

"I've been in emergency-- You're just real cheerful tonight, aren't you? Great little optimist." Joking about bullet wounds, for crying out loud.

"Ah, it's my best attribute, my charm." He ruffled my hair, brushing it back lightly, then froze. He put his fingers against my mouth.

I heard it, too. Footsteps. Quiet feet, bare brushes of shosole against concrete as someone moved along the warehouse wall.

I'd've killed myself before I would have sneezed. Or Bodie would have strangled me...

The feet passed us. I gulped air.

"Give up breathing for Lent?" Bodie whispered in my ear.

"Bastard," I murmured in response.

Sudden pause of sound. I quit breathing again. The sour taste of bile and fear burnt the back of my throat, and I almost gagged.

Bodie crouched beside me, as still as a cat. I could tell that he was breathing solely because his jacket brushed in a rhythm against my ribs.

The feet retreated into the distance. This time I let my breath out. My leg ached and all I wanted, desperately, was to be at home and in bed. I was going to become the first Baptist nun, honestly...

From far away came a steady half-familiar noise. Bodie's head went up. Then he relaxed. The even throbbing sound grew closer--a car engine. Ray? Bodie must have thought so.

But that meant that Ray would walk right into this-- No, he'd been warned. He'd be on his guard.

The car sounded nearer. Bodie shifted away

from me, huddling next to the opening, peering out.

Two bullets exploded, and then the sound of shattering glass and screeching tires broke the stillness. Metal clashed solidly against metal. Feet pounded against the pavement--two pairs, and the sound tangled confusingly, no way to tell who was who.

"Bodie!" One was Ray.

Beside me, Bodie went taut, vibrating with some emotion--fear? Fear. If I hadn't been there, he would have been out there with Ray. Of course, if I hadn't been there, then neither would they.

The feet split up into two distinct sections. Almost above our heads, a man panted, the breaths sounding like sobs. Bullets whined again, chipping brick and splintering wood.

One hand pressed down hard on my shoulder. "Stay put," Bodie whispered. He scrambled for the faintly visible opening. For just a fraction of a second, his head and shoulders stood out against the shadows as a darker patch of moving shadow.

Another bullet. Bodie gasped, shuddered, and fell backward. I thought he'd tripped; I wanted to think that he'd tripped.

Then Wolfgang laughed.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," whispered Paul.

All kinds of pictures flashed through my head, mostly memories of those photos in Nicola Morland's file. I got from the wall to Bodie in a half-jump, ignoring my leg, and scrabbled frantically for his weapon. It was in his hand, still, his limp hand...

His voice and Ray's voice blended in my head, the directions as clear as if I were hearing them for the first time.

'Point it like it was your finger.'

"Rachel, give it up," Paul said. He walked forward; I heard his shoes scraping on the concrete.

My mouth was dry. It hurt to breathe.

"Rae," he said. He bent to peer inside our hiding place. For a moment, like Bodie, his head and shoulders stood out against the gap.

'Aim for the largest target.'

I did.

The gun jerked upward. The roar echoed in the confined space. I was deafened; my thumb throbbed; my wrists ached.

Wolfgang yelped.

I heard a second shot, and then I pulled the trigger again, and again--

When the gun clicked on empty, I realized that he wasn't there any longer. And that Ray was saying my name, over and over, chiding.

"Ray?"



He sighed. "I said, Duchess, I got 'im after you did. Now put the gun down, luv, there's a good girl."

"There aren't any more bullets in it," I said meekly.

"Thank God. Where's Bodie?"

"Oh, Lord, I forgot, I'm sorry! Bodie?" In feeling over him, I found blood welling out of his shoulder, sticky on my fingers. The wound seemed to be in the fleshy part, not in the joint, or against bone, or in the intercostal spaces. My sweater made a fairly decent improvised pressure pad.

Bodie stirred then, and groaned. "Not so bloody hard, Duchess. Ray?"

"Here. How bad is it?"

"Not bad." He tried to sit up. I had to help him. "Not good either." On a second try, he got to his knees. "Get me out of here, Duchess."

Between my support and his one-handed crawling, we got out into the fresher air of smoggy London.

"Yeah," Ray said into his radio. "Bodie's injured. Need an ambulance, sir."

"Miss McGregor; how is she?" Cowley's voice.

Ray looked over at me. "You hurt?"

"No--yes, but it's nothing, just a bruise."

"Sir?" he said into the R/T.

"I heard. Wolfgang?"

"Still alive. Ray sounded disgusted. "May even live to make trial."

"Pity. We'll be there shortly."

Bodie sat down hard, and leaned his head back against my shoulder. Ray crossed to us in one smooth spring, tucking the radio inside his jacket as he did. He checked my makeshift bandage, then sat back on his heels.

"Goddamnit, Sunshine," he said, "why couldn't you 'ave stayed put?"

"What, and leave you out there on your own? You might've gotten lost." Bodie's head lolled, but he brought it back up.

Ray took hold of his good shoulder briefly, then said, in a voice hovering between laughter and anxiety, "You great idiot."

Sirens echoed faintly in the distance.

"Did you ever hear the one about the three-legged lady?" Bodie said. His voice was a thread of its usual sardonic self. He started to tell it, dragging it out until the sound of the sirens and the accompanying flashing lights cut across the bawdy narrative.

Mr. Cowley had been efficient, collecting two ambulances. He limped over to us, and supervised as Wolfgang was loaded into one ambulance, with Murphy and McNab as escorts.

Bodie was loaded into the other one while Ray and I watched.

"She's hurt, too," Ray said.

Traitor. The EMT's advanced on me, and I said hastily, "It's only a bruise; I didn't hurt my leg much."

"Then you'll be back out tonight, won't you?" Cowley interrupted.

I tried pointing out that a woman could get tired of ending up in hospitals. He was not impressed. It takes a lot to impress George Cowley.

As Ray bundled me into the ambulance, and then piled in himself, Cowley added, "And next time you teach someone to shoot, Doyle, teach them to aim."

"He did," I said indignantly. "And I did. And I hit him the first time and it's the first time that counts."

"Aye. But if you're going to learn that kind of thing, you may as well learn to do it competently. There's no point in half-measures." He shut the ambulance door.

Thereby getting the last word, as usual.

To summarize the next two months--I testified when Wolfgang stood trial, and he did end up as a 'guest of the Queen,' in Mr. Cowley's phrasing. I also finished my internship, and St. Christopher's offered me a position. That was probably Mr. Cowley also. On the other hand, I'm only proud when I can afford to be, so I took the job.

I didn't see either of the twins during that two-month period, except to listen to them give evidence at the trial. That part of it was over; they had other things to do, after all.

Walking home to a new flat at eleven p.m. on a Friday night, I was humming softly to myself. If I hurried, I could make the last Underground to Earl's Court.

Two men slipped out of the dark, blocking my path and I froze. Wolfgang was in jail-- And then I recognized them.

"Bodie--Ray!" I got my breath back. "What's the idea of scaring me out of half a year's growth? You want to give me grey hairs before my time?"

"No," Bodie said in that lazy drawl, "just convince you not to walk home alone."

"Or better still," added Ray, "buy a car."

So someone was still keeping an eye on me? "I'll make you a deal. You don't do that to me again and I'll buy a car."

"Sounds fair," Ray said.

Bodie nodded. "Actually, luv, we came to see if a couple of civil servants could walk you home."

Civil servants. I gave in, grinned, and said, "Why not?" *

GET THE MESSAGE

Roy:

What
a work of man
am I:
imbued with doubt
a masterpiece
by any other hand
might bleed equally,
dealt such a wound;
but does this evidence
of my mortality
make me less
than another
truly alive?
What's the difference?
The quality of life,
that's what
counts
but the quality of life
is to be fleet
and elusive,
by chance
or by design.

Rick:

What's the difference?
I don't like this
arbitrary life
and death dealing,
but I do the job that
I was made
to do, well,
sure, I don't like it but
they made me;
nobody asked me
what I wanted
to do
for a living
if that's what you call this,
a living
death
it's the future
none of us can escape:
that's one thing
we have in common,
we all have to face it
sooner
or later.

Roy:

Be aware:
being so
is a cruel joke.
You can't touch the past
so how can you
hold onto it
try to
prove it ever existed.
Remember
the past
you think
you recall
might be anything but
your own
memory
true or false,
what's the difference:
when it's gone
it's gone
whether it's yours
or somebody else's
was it the real thing
that matters.

Rick:

Don't tell me
that
you know
what
you know
what
do you know
for certain
nothing
nothing
is for certain
you can't know
what
I don't know
I don't want to.
I'm afraid.
You're mortal.
Too.

Roy:

I think
I remember
how
I hate the past
I get the message
true or false
life's a learning experience
too short for some of us
to get the message.
Do you?

Rick:

I think
I'm awake
but how do I know
if I dream
truly
I must be
if I think
I am:
would I doubt
even in my dreams
if I were not?
What is being
truly
aware?
What proof?
What proof?
What kind of work
am I?

Liz Sharpe



THE LOST JEDI BOYS

BARBARA TENNISON

Luke, tenor
Yoda, gravel bass
Lady Manisyn, lyric mezzo
Han Solo, baritone

Leia, soprano
Ben "Fade" Kenobi, baritone
R2D2, electronic
Chorus of Lost Jedi Boys, TTBB

Act 1

Swamp on Dagobah. Luke, leading a troop of the Lost Jedi on a trek through the scrub, stops them and recounts the tale of his finding and joining the Jedi band upon his return to Dagobah, under the tutelage of Captain "Fade" Kenobi and Master Yoda. Here in the jungle, the Jedi maintain their ancient way of life, unchanged and undying. "When I Was a Lad, I Farmed the Sand."

Yoda enters and chases them offstage to continue their training run. He sings a tragic ditty about the loss of dignity he sustained when he swallowed Luke's digital watch, "Forty Seconds of Hope," so that the youth would have to stay on Dagobah. He is overheard by Lady Manisyn of the Silver Hair, the local representative of the Dark Side. She emerges from the forest to reproach him for his treatment of Luke; he reproaches her for trying to lure the Lost Jedi away from the path of Light and chastity. They sing a duet reaffirming their enmity. Yoda, having had his say, stomps off. Lady Manisyn then seats herself on a convenient rock to sing a tender, lyric ballad of carnal lust for Luke and the rest of the Jedi, who remind her of Darth Vader, "Ah, The Jedi of Yore."

A loud crash reverberates in the strings and percussion. The Millennium Falcon sails in and lands, to disgorge Han Solo, Princess Leia, and R2D2. From their dialogue, it develops that Han Solo was drawn here by a Force he does not understand, and Leia tagged after him out of love, curiosity, and a desperate need to find more pilots for the Rebellion. After their brief argument, "Why Are We Here --You're Crazy!", Han starts into the jungle, singing a song about his own manifold perfections. The Princess makes sarcastic comments in Han's hearing but sighs agreement aside. They have barely set off when the Lost Jedi come bounding through the clearing, still on their training run, and stumble over Han and Leia: "Oho, What Have We Here?" chorus. They call for Yoda to ask him, "Animal, Vegetable, or Mineral?" Yoda hails Solo as an addition to the Jedi, citing his piloting skills as proof of his Force-ability. Han is surprised to see Luke, and

more surprised that Luke does not recognize him. He resolves to rescue Luke from Yoda's thrall. The act ends on a rousing chorus of determination for all present, each intent upon achieving his or her objectives.

Act 2

The clearing by Yoda's house. Yoda, ticking audibly, discusses Solo with Kenobi, who fades gradually into the scene, smile first: "So That's the Other Hope?" Yoda retires into the house ("Oh Dear, For Tea I'll Be Late") and Ben fades out. Luke and Han come into view. Han is questioning Luke about his previous life, but Luke can only talk about the Lady Manisyn, whom he describes in lascivious detail. Han realizes that Luke is enthralled by Manisyn rather than Yoda, but is so fascinated by Luke's description that he forgets to remind Luke of his past and asks for an introduction to the Lady. The troop of Lost Jedi, however, bound into the clearing just then and carry both of them away for a jog through the forest.

Leia enters the now-empty clearing for a soliloquy, "A Wand'ring Princess I, A Thing of Shreds and Patches," detailing the economic difficulties of running a Rebellion. Ben fades in with his best halo effect ("Perhaps You've Never Seen a Smile Without a Face") and they have a touching recognition and reunion scene, during which Ben warns Leia that Yoda wants to keep Han on Dagobah. They finish the scene with a duet, "Of Han Bereft I'd Perish," Leia wanting to keep Han loyal to herself, Ben wanting Han not to usurp Luke's place as leader of the Lost Jedi. Kenobi fades out.

By this time the Jedi have returned from their expedition and are creeping into the edges of the clearing, amazed at Leia's beauty. She questions them and learns that most of them are ex-pilots, whereupon she exerts all her charm to entice them to join the Rebellion. About half succumb to her appeal and follow her away toward the Falcon.

Act 3

Scene 1

Lagoon outside the tree cave. Luke is discovered sitting outside the cave, brooding. He sings the aria, "I Wanted to Be a Jedi, But Did I Know in Time?" detailing the sense of something missing he feels among Yoda and the Lost Jedi. He follows up with an account of how enjoyable he finds the company of the Lady Manisyn. Yoda bursts into the clearing with a grumpy little tune, "Aha! Overheard That I Did!" and drags Luke away.

Silence falls on the clearing. After a pastoral musical interlude based on the "Spaceship Rising from the Swamp" theme from TESB, increasingly sprightly and atonal melodic fragments announce the appearance of the Dagoness Monster (aka the Greater Pennsylvania Scrod) which emerges from the lagoon to perform a moonlit dance. The waving tentacles gradually assume the forms of comely maidens swimming and dancing in the waters of the lagoon, until they are startled by the noisy entrance of Han Solo, whereupon they all disappear.

Solo gazes into the water, musing, "I Thought I Saw a Girl." His coaxing tones are answered by the reappearance of a tentacle from the depths, which quickly becomes a simulacrum of the Lady Manisyn, veiled only in her long silver hair. She does not sing in words but voices her appeal to Han in melting clarinet tones. He is completely enraptured and speedily joins her in the water, where he is about to be dragged into the muddy depths forever when the genuine Manisyn appears from her cave and throws a knife into the siren's body, which disappears abruptly. Han is left treading water, singing, "Huh, Where'd She Go?" in pretty confusion. Manisyn swims out to him and invites him to resume the

romance, and they gain the shore and exit into her cave. They have barely entered it, however, when Leia enters, searching for Han and highly incensed to find him apparently on the best of terms with the only other woman on the planet. She sings an aria of passionate rage, "Just You Wait, Handsome Solo," during which Luke reenters, having escaped from Yoda. He is looking for Manisyn. Realizing that they are upon the same errand and are frustrated by the same couple, they look into each other's eyes and perceive a mutual sympathy. They vow eternal love and rush off into the moonlight forest (to the music of the last section of Act I, *Die Walküre*). Silence, broken only by passionate sighs, falls on the lagoon.

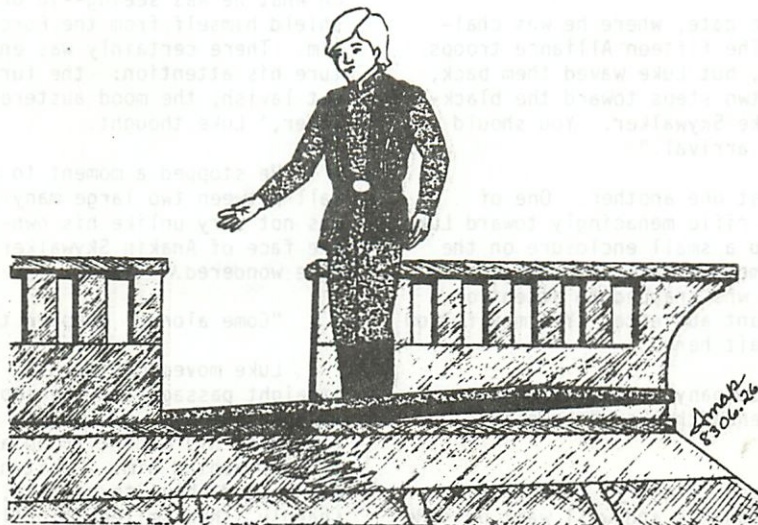
Scene 2

Clearing by Yoda's house. Yoda is discovered in duet with R2D2, apparently learning from the droid what has transpired in the tree-cave lagoon. He sings a searching soliloquy which concludes that he must send Luke away to keep Han, his other hope, with the Lost Jedi. Therefore when Luke and Leia, somewhat disheveled, return hand-in-hand from the lagoon, "Look What Followed Me Home, Master, Can I Keep It?", Yoda coughs up the watch and presents it to him with an old Jedi blessing, "No One Will Give You the Time of Day to Keep Your Head on Your Shoulders." Luke and Leia run off to hijack the *Falcon* with its load of escaping Jedi pilots, and it is shortly seen wafting away over the treetops, as Ben Kenobi, fading in just too late to stop them, shrieks "Curses, Foiled Again," and disappears in a puff of smoke.

The Lost Jedi Boys assemble to hail their new leader, Han Solo, and his Lady Consort, and the only flaw in the general rejoicing is Yoda's and Manisyn's bickering asides during the chorus. ☼



THE ADVENTURES OF LUKE PLANKWALKER ??



Pass' on What You Have Learned

Fern Marder

Luke Skywalker stared at the main gate of the...estate. He refused to call it a palace, though it definitely qualified. Just as he refused--vehemently--to allow anyone to call him Lord Vader. The one thing he couldn't escape was the fact that he was, indeed, now Lord of the Sith, holding all lands, revenues, and honors appertaining thereto.

The New Republic Senate had been more than generous in its thanks to those who had played integral roles in the victorious rebellion. Positions of authority in the new-formed government had gone to all rebel leaders who wanted them. The titular holdings of much of the Imperial nobility had been parceled out to new administrators. Luke had tried to decline any such tribute but, when pressed, had decided to accept what he could rationalize as his rightful inheritance. 'If nothing else,' Luke thought now, looking up at the mansion, 'it's a better place to found a Jedi school than a burned-out farm on Tatooine.'

He walked up to the gate, where he was challenged by two guards. The fifteen Alliance troops with him moved to ready, but Luke waved them back, himself taking another two steps toward the black-clad figures. "I am Luke Skywalker. You should have been advised of my arrival."

The guards looked at one another. One of them raised his blaster rifle menacingly toward Luke as the other ducked into a small enclosure on the inside of the gate. A moment later he emerged, nodding at his partner, who snapped to attention. "The Lady Alais will grant audience. You may follow us. Your guards will wait here."

"My escort will accompany us and will wait outside the Lady's audience chamber," Luke said measuredly.

The spokesman frowned slightly, then said, "Your escort will accompany us and will wait outside the Lady's audience chamber."

"Thank you," Luke murmured.

The guard bowed slightly, then headed in the direction of the large, ornate glass doors of the...oh, hell...palace. 'The Lady Alais?' Luke mused. 'Who is the Lady Alais?' They walked up the path silently. 'Nobody said anything about...damn! Is there a Lady Vader?' It had never occurred to Luke to question whether his father might have taken a consort. 'Why not? My mother was stolen away from him.'

The guards opened the doors, one to each side. The young Jedi stopped abruptly in the doorway as the Force-presence of the household met him as palpably as a wall. He strengthened his defenses and proceeded into the spacious hallway. His companions followed; the Sith guards brought up the rear.

Luke was directed to walk to the end of the long corridor and then turn left. As he moved through the well-appointed gallery, he concentrated on what he was seeing--in order to more easily shield himself from the Force-probe that bombarded him. There certainly was enough around him to capture his attention: the furnishings were rich yet not lavish, the mood austere yet imposing. 'Like Vader,' Luke thought.

He stopped a moment to study a portrait on the wall between two large many-paned windows. The face was not very unlike his own--only older. It was not the face of Anakin Skywalker. 'My grandfather?' Luke wondered.

"Come along," snapped the senior guard.

Luke moved on, turning at the end of the straight passageway. He soon found himself facing an open doorway, presumably his destination. He turned to his escort troop and addressed the first officer behind him. "Wait here, Robb." When the man seemed about to protest, Luke looked at him sharply, then smiled slightly. "It'll be all right. I can take care of myself." With that he turned and

followed the two palace guards into the room.

His only experience with palaces being that of Jabba the Hutt, Luke was surprised to find himself in a large, comfortable-looking sitting room. The chaos he had felt in the Force out in the corridors subsided here to a single, pointed presence.

The Lady Alais rose from her seat at the window and approached Luke. He was relieved--and curious--to find himself facing a young woman close to his own age. The guards bowed, then departed without a word.

She was his height, and faced him squarely. She scrutinized him with clear grey eyes, the kind of eyes that were a window to her soul. Those eyes were cold--an unsettling contrast to the long sun-blond hair gathered with a clip of red-brown stone, to fall in elegant waves over the shoulders of her dark red gown. Her demeanor suited the harshness reflected in her eyes, rather than the warmth of her apparel.

He noticed that the Lady moved with the grace and dignity of one raised to title. He found himself standing a little straighter, breathing more measuredly, just as he had the first time he had put on his pilot's uniform. Or the first time he had tried on the black Jedi formal hidden in the trunk in Ben's hut, along with the lightsaber components and other Jedi artifacts.

"Who are you to dare come here?" she said in scathing tones. "We informed the Senate that our intentions were entirely peaceful, but that we would not tolerate interference from intruders."

Luke did not hesitate. He was prepared for this. "I am Luke Skywalker, son of Anakin Skywalker who was also known as Darth Vader. I am my father's acknowledged heir, rightful claimant to the title of Lord of the Sith." He watched the lady's arrogant mask disintegrate into a look of horrified surprise. "I am no intruder here. But who are you to speak for this estate?"

The young woman collected herself quickly. "I am Alais Morran, ward of my Lord Vader, and mistress of his estates. My Lord never mentioned a son," she added haltingly.

"Nevertheless, you know well in the Force that I am telling the truth." The Lady Alais slowly nodded. She frowned as the implications of that acceptance obviously occurred to her. Her Force-probe of him ceased abruptly, though her strength--and, Luke noted, her Darkness--in the Force were undiminished.

Luke smiled and relaxed his guard just a bit. "That's all right. I didn't know my father had taken anyone under his protection. Surely that was not his reputation."

Alais managed a non-scowl in return. "There were any number of facets to my Lord Vader's person which were shown only to those who came to know him by more than just reputation."

Luke sighed, almost involuntarily. "I wish I had had that opportunity. I'm sure that there are a lot of things I should know about my father." Then, of course, he was also sure that there were a lot of

things about his father's life that he wouldn't want to know...

There was a moment of silence; each of them seemed to expect the other to say something. Finally, the Lady gestured toward the sofa against the wall to Luke's right. She actually nodded a slight deference. "Won't you sit down, Sir?"

'Good,' Luke thought. 'She doesn't want to call me Lord Vader any more than I want her to.'

Sitting so close to such a disquieting Force-presence didn't appeal to the Jedi, but he saw no way around it. He moved to the sofa; she approached it from her stance on the other side of it. Again, the awkward frozen seconds as each waited for the other to sit down. Luke was grateful when Alais moved first, gathering her long, full skirt around her and taking a seat at one end of the sofa. He, of course, set himself at the far end.

The iota of informality rendered by their new position seemed to renew Alais' control of the situation. Again the Lady of the house, she raised her head and stared at Luke. "What is your disposition regarding these lands and those here? Surely we have earned some consideration, having maintained my Lord Vader's household and estate these years, in his absence."

"Just how many people are here?" Luke asked cautiously. "And in what capacity?"

He could feel Alais draw the Force around her, perhaps protectively, perhaps secretively. When she answered, Luke found himself probing for truth, despite his disinclination to use the Force casually. And he knew she knew he was doing so.

"There are sixteen here in the household." At Luke's questioning glance, she added, "More than half the manor has been closed off for some time. The guard number twelve. There are also groundskeepers, who, with their families, make another nine."

"And to whom do they give their loyalty?"

Alais continued to look directly at him, but said nothing.

"To you?" Luke ventured.

The woman looked down, as though disarmed for the moment. "Only insofar as I continue to represent my Lord Vader's wishes."

Luke raised an eyebrow. Maybe formality would respond better to formality. "And what do you suppose 'the Lord Vader's wishes' would be regarding the New Republic government?"

"The Imperium did not concern us here. Why should we be any more concerned with your Republic?" The words were noncommittal enough, but the tone and look that went with them were deadly.

"I see," said Luke dryly. "Just what does concern you here?"

Alais bristled. "I do not see why that should be of any significance to your government."

Though he almost hated this particular opportunity, Luke pounced. "You seem to forget that I'm not here as a representative of the Republic Senate. I am Lord of these estates now, and what happens here is of great significance to me." He gave the Lady a moment to let that sink in, then continued. "My father did not seem the kind of man who would keep a large household and grounds simply for his occasional pleasure when he should happen to visit."

The Lady Alais sighed deeply, then lifted her gaze to Luke's. "Is it not possible that the Lord Vader cared enough for those here to wish to provide for them well?"

The Force around her quivered with doubts all too apparent to both her and her listener. In that second of wavering, Luke could feel beyond the Lady's Force-presence--and that of the house itself --to a number of powerful Force-sensitives very close by.

Luke smiled as the significance of what he was feeling hit him. "You must all have been very special to him indeed. Just what was my father doing here?"

"Teaching the Force."

There were five students in residence on the Sith: four men and one woman, ranging in age from eighteen to twenty-five, most of whom had been there for at least five years. As Vader had happened upon young Force-sensitives, he had taken them under his 'protection' and moved them into his household.

Alais was very different from them, having come to Vader's care when still a very young child. She had been raised and trained in the Force--first by her own parents, then by Vader--from early childhood. She was stronger and more skilled than the others and, while their Master was away from the Sith, Alais was teacher as well as mistress of the household.

Luke met the students that evening, after he and his party were given rooms in the mansion. The guards of the late Lord Vader were replaced by the guards of the new...Lord...of the manor. Otherwise, for the moment at least, the existing staff were informed that they were welcome to stay, so long as they rendered good service.

The five concrete pillars of Force-shield had appeared, been presented to Luke, refused to answer any questions whatsoever, and withdrew. They left behind them an unpleasant pall in the room.

Luke realized that, in his father, he had felt the anger in the Dark Side of the Force. In the Emperor's presence, he had experienced its fire. But here for the first time was true Darkness.

The last student to leave admitted the Lady Alais to the sitting room. Luke both wondered at and welcomed the difference in Force surrounding her from that of the others. If he was ever to figure out what to do with these people, it would have to be with the Lady's help.

She eyed his look of consternation and smiled--

perhaps snidely. "Is something the matter? Were they too much for you?"

"Huh?" Luke jarred back to physical reality. And realized that the last thing he dared do in this place was to be caught off guard. "Uh, no. They are only my father's students--you seem to forget that I came to know not only my father, but also his Master." Luke's deliberate one-upmanship did its job. She drew back in the Force.

"Together we are strong." Not nonchalantly enough, she took a seat in a high-backed brocade chair next to the fireplace.

"Strong, perhaps, but in what? What was the focus of my father's teaching here?"

Alais smiled, but said nothing.

Luke walked over to her chair and leaned on one corner of its back. "You're different from them somehow. Different in the Force."

Alais brightened.

'Wrong word,' Luke thought.

"Am I? How so?"

"You're more..." Luke searched for the right description. 'How do you describe different levels of a malevolence you don't understand to begin with? Much less diplomatically.' "More complete. You aren't just a one-dimensional shell. There is nothing to them but their Darkness." Luke walked around Alais' chair and sat down in its mate, directly opposite. "They remind me of my father the very first time I saw him. I couldn't feel him at all. He was just a black shell with no...humanity. Even after I met him, it took a while to realize that there was good in him. Surely you saw that, even if the others couldn't appreciate it."

Alais looked down. Self-consciously?

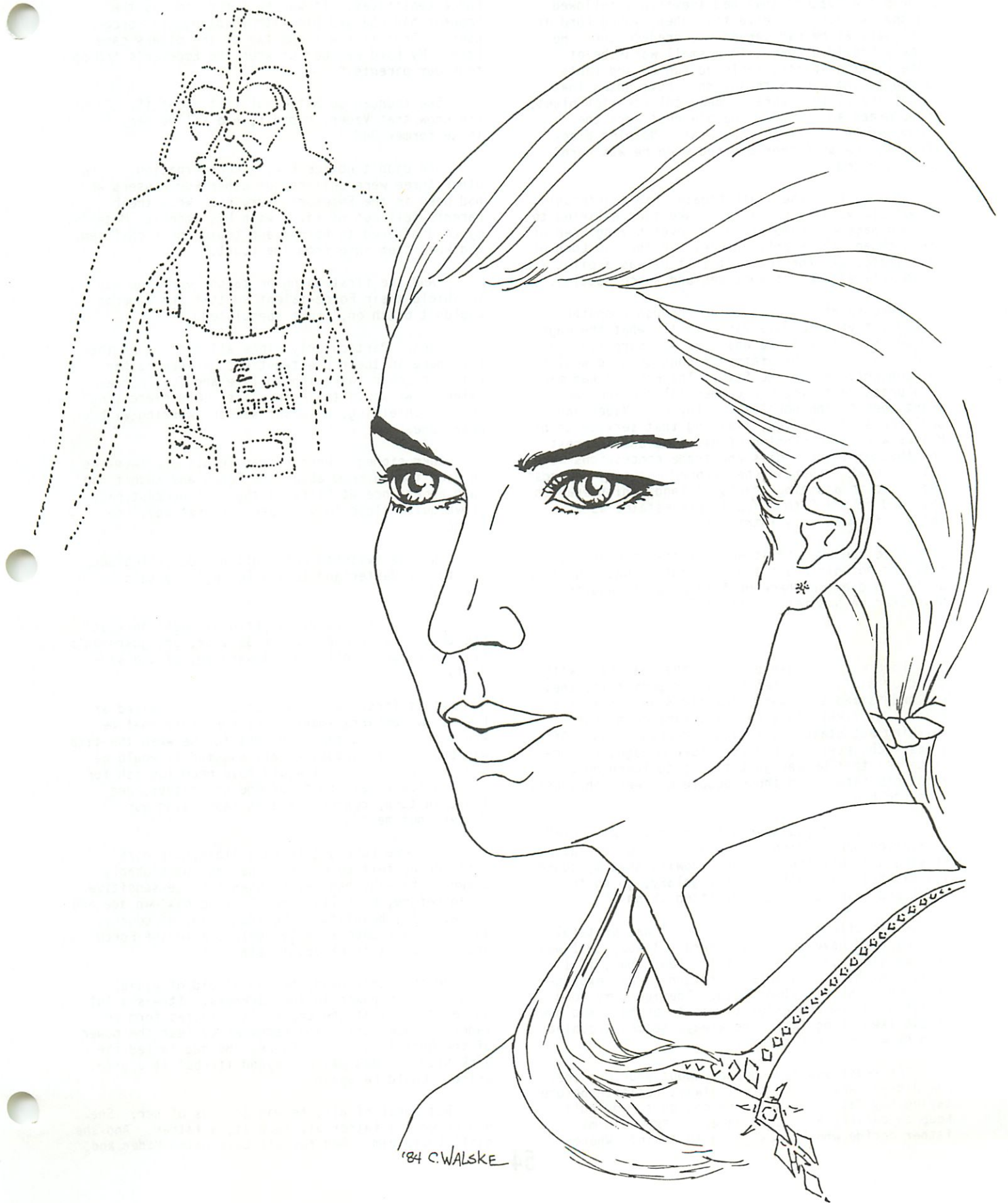
"Alais?"

"My Lord raised me. He was very good to me. It did not--does not--concern me that others saw him as evil. He taught me strength and confidence and Force-control." She spoke softly, as though to herself--a litany learned as a child. And yet something more. The disturbance in her Force-presence made Luke wonder if she had ever before questioned her feelings for her Master. As her formality and mask faltered, Luke began to realize that the bleakness of her Force-presence was more an aggressiveness and desire for power than any hatred or anger. It was an absence of Light rather than Darkness. Hope.

"Didn't you ever wonder about my father's motives in taking you into his care?"

The Force in the room became charged and, when Alais raised her head, it was with a new-found look of defiance. "It is not for me to judge my Lord Vader. Or for you!" With that she got up and left the room, leaving an open-mouthed Luke behind her.

Damn!



The next few days passed relatively uneventfully. A valet attached himself to Luke, insisting on calling him "my Lord"--Luke finally convinced him to drop the "Vader" that had inevitably followed it--and swearing to serve the, ahem, young Lord as faithfully as he had served his predecessor. He quickly provided Luke with a small wardrobe of loose-fitting shirts, tailored tunics and pants suited to the cool Sith autumn. Luke noted that all of the clothes were of deep colors--rich blues, gold, green and brown. The plainest were the creamy-white shirts for day wear. Nothing black. 'Is this how my father dressed when he was here?' Luke wondered.

The rest of the staff treated him courteously, if not always deferentially. Luke took a liking to a young page who complained of never having been off the Sith and whose only interest in the new Lord of the estates was for the fact that he was a pilot and could tell stories of Wookiees and space battles.

Luke spent his days going through computer records, trying to determine exactly what the magnitude of his inheritance was. He was surprised to learn that all of his father's considerable wealth was concentrated on the Sith. The Emperor had made it a practice to impound commercial concerns and grant them to the nobility as favors. Vader had declined such tributes, claiming that service to his Master was all-consuming of his time and interest and that mining colonies and trade concessions were not his goal. Instead, he favored monetary rewards and title to adjoining tracts of land, which enabled the Lord of the Sith to build his estates as a retreat from courtly intrigues.

Luke wondered if it weren't the Emperor's control and not his court that his father had sought to avoid. Did anyone here on Sith know the Anakin Skywalker he had met so briefly?

Each evening Luke dined in the main hall with the Lady Alais and, when she would permit it, they sat and talked afterward, sometimes well into the night. At first Alais was reluctant to discuss anything but status, politics and pragmatics. After a few such sessions, however, Luke managed to convince her that he was just trying to learn more about his father and those people who were obviously close to him.

"But didn't you ever want to travel with him?" Luke asked one evening. "I would have gone crazy staying here all the time and knowing that my guardian was traveling all over the galaxy, going to court and doing all those exciting things."

Alais uttered a rare laugh. "I was grateful that my Lord gave me a place here. I suppose I was just as glad not to leave it for fear that, if I left, I might not be able to return." Her expression went wistful, almost sad. "Besides, my Lord always said how wonderful it was to be here and how he disliked being away. He always seemed troubled when he would first return."

"At least you had company about your own age. How did--" Why did he still always hesitate before saying 'my father'? Well, he couldn't, wouldn't keep on calling him 'Lord Vader.' "How did my father decide who he was going to train? Where

did the other students come from?"

"In his travels, my Lord sought out young Force-sensitives. It was easy for him, as the Emperor had charged him with locating all Force-users. That is how I and two of the others came here. My Lord rescued us when the Emperor's troops took our parents."

She sounded so matter-of-fact about it. Didn't she know that Vader, himself, had killed many of those former Jedi?

She didn't notice Luke's consternation. "The other three were children of other Force-users who had been in the Emperor's service. When their parents fell out of favor with His Imperial Majesty, my Lord offered to harbor and train their children, and keep them safe from the court."

"And the first thing he taught everyone was to shield their Force-talent so that the Emperor wouldn't catch on," Luke speculated.

"Yes. Particularly since all but one of them came here in their pre-twenties and were rather noisy in their awakening to life and full Force-talent. We would train in pairs. One exercising and one shielding, a senior student working with a newer one."

Luke sighed. When he was in his pre-twenties he didn't even know about the Force and hadn't had much experience at "life" either. "You must have grown quite close to your partner that way," he hedged.

"No, we switched pairs often. Our allegiance was to our Master and to the Force," she said sternly.

"If you will permit a personal question--but one that is of concern to me as your, ah, guardian's heir--are you...inclined...toward any of the students?"

Alais first looked affronted, then smiled at Luke's own embarrassment. "My Lord said that he would choose a suitable consort for me when the time was proper. I suppose we all assumed it would be one of those here. It would have been foolish for me to allow myself to favor one or another, and they, in turn, concentrated on impressing our Master, not me."

The more Luke got to know Alais, the more confused he felt about her. He was unmistakably drawn to her--he had never known a Force-sensitive woman before, much less one close to his own age and quite, well, beautiful. Besides Leia, of course. But he hadn't been able to feel Leia in the Force and... 'Don't think about Leia.'

On the other hand, he was afraid of Alais, afraid of her power in the Darkness. It was a lot easier to look at the Emperor's withered form or Vader's black coffin and remember to fear the power of the Dark Side of the Force. He had tasted the Dark Side and had passed beyond it--but at a great price. Could he again?

But worst of all, he was jealous of her. She had known his father as, face it, a father. And she still loved him. And for all Luke hated Vader and

the idea that Vader was his father, at least he would have had a father. A real father. Not a question or a story. How many nights in his twenty-five years had he woken up crying out "Father"?

Luke was glad when he finished with the business matters of his father's estate. Far more interesting to Luke than the financial tapes were the personal papers, diaries, and letters. These gave him some insight into his history, his grandparents...his heritage.

Luke had come from a long line of Jedi--his grandfather, Valorum Skywalker, Prince and General, had fought at Ben Kenobi's side during the Clone Wars. Valorum had entrusted his eldest son to the Jedi Master's teachings in the hopes that young Anakin could be prepared quickly to fight in the wars. 'Too quickly,' thought Luke wryly. The estate house and the land immediately under it had been titled to Prince Valorum of the Sith and had been Anakin's boyhood home.

Letters from son to father, kept by Valorum, then kept by Vader. Nostalgia. Not exactly a weakness you would expect from Darth Vader. 'Anakin Skywalker,' Luke corrected himself fiercely.

As the letters crept forward in years and Darkness, Luke found himself more and more engrossed, until, finally, he was reading aloud even as he heard what he imagined to be Anakin/Darth's voice in his own mind.

"...There is power here, Father, that neither you nor Master Kenobi ever hinted at. It is within me and surrounds me. It is there for the mastery...

"...Kenobi was trying to cage me so I sought the freedom of another Master--one who will not be afraid to teach me what I want to know...

"...Despite the fact that we have not contacted one another in many months, Father, I feel it incumbent upon me to inform you and Mother that His Imperial Majesty has honored me with his favor and has given to me as consort a lady of his court..."

Luke dropped this last dispatch on the desk. A consort. The consort of a Jedi turned to Darkness.

"No!" Luke caught himself screaming. He had always assumed that he, and Leia, had been conceived before Vader's Darkness had set in. It had helped him to accept his father, however reluctantly.

No wonder Kenobi had been so worried about getting the infants away. And why everyone avoided discussing their mother. 'If she was an Imperial courtier...had she been coerced...or worse?' Luke slammed his right fist down on the paper, then closed his eyes as the pain--and the irony of that act--washed over him.

Luke was next conscious of the sound of heavy, rhythmic footsteps in the corridor outside the office. 'Probably the guard shift change,' he mused. That meant it was nineteen hours. Damn! How long had he been sitting there staring at that last letter? He quickly gathered the loose documents

together, replaced them in their paper case, and headed for the door. He had about twenty minutes to get back to his apartment, change into more formal clothes and make his way to the main dining room.

He carefully shut the wooden door to his father's office behind him and hit the lockcode buttons. He walked quickly down the hall and began to climb the spiraling stairs to his quarters level. He had grown used to the disquiet in the Force in the house, and consistently put up his strongest shield against the cold heartlessness he felt and the overpowering presence of six other strong Force-users. It was easy to see why the Jedi maintained a tradition of single master-disciple relationships. Master Yoda had trained Ben Kenobi, Kenobi had trained Anakin Skywalker, but Darth Vader had been training...

Luke never got to finish the thought. He was thrown backward by a fierce blow to the chest--a blow in the Force. The Jedi composed himself even as he began to fall, tucked, rolled, and leaped to his feet as he reached the bottom. He came up to find himself facing two black-clad opponents, one male, one female. The three remaining students came swiftly down the stairs to stand behind him.

Luke marshaled the Force within him and lashed out. He caught the tall dark-haired man before him in the face with his forearm as he trip-kicked the woman. Those behind him fell back, suddenly winded by Luke's Force-attack. But before Luke could move again, he was bombarded by a ring of stifling heat, electrified. The five moved closer and the ring tightened. Luke felt the pain wash over him. 'Stay calm,' he told himself. 'Don't lose control.' Garbage!

In the next second Luke exploded the ring of fire, rocking all five attackers back and searing the wall beside them. He turned on the three collapsed on the stairs and drew his lightsaber. His rage gave strength to its glow and he moved toward them.

One of them tried to rise, but fell back. A movement behind him made Luke whirl toward the pair on the floor. He waved his saber menacingly at the young man who had gotten to his feet. The man tripped over the legs of the woman as he retreated from the approaching blade. Luke laughed, his eyes glowing royal as fury coursed through him, summoning up a strength in the Force that could come only from its Darkness.

The sound of a lightsaber igniting brought Luke instantly back around toward the stairs. Its wielder--the same student that had tried to rise before, Errik, the youngest--moved sluggishly.

Luke didn't hesitate for a second. He moved, catlike, toward his foe.

The boy nudged the saber in Luke's direction. Luke brought his blade up, catching the other's pale amber rod low, near the hilt. The lightsaber flew from Errik's hand, the blade slashing through the ornate banister before it vanished, the hilt clattering to the floor and skidding across the stone. Luke advanced again, forcing his opponent to back awkwardly up two steps and against the wall.

"My Lord."



The stern yet quiet voice from above him startled Luke. He looked up to find Alais coming slowly down the stairs. He raised the saber toward her and she stopped, some eight steps from the bottom.

"They are yours," she said evenly, "but I implore you, spare this house the spectre of their deaths. Take them outside. They have disgraced themselves and will not resist you."

Having to consider the Lady's words brought Luke back to normalcy. Appalled at what he felt in himself, the Jedi quelled his anger and turned off his lightsaber. He stepped back and looked from Alais to Errik, then took two deep, calming breaths.

Alais came slowly down to the level of the student. In a most unladylike fashion, she spat at him and then pushed him down the last two steps. "Kneel to your Master, you idiot. And the rest of you." She gestured angrily at the others--the woman on the floor, who had rolled over and was holding her head; her partner, struggling to his feet in obvious fear and embarrassment; and the two men still slumped on the stairs, who were moaning slightly as they regained consciousness.

Errik dropped to one knee before Luke and bowed his head. That completed Luke's sobering as nothing else could.

The Jedi tried to avoid looking at the bent figure at his feet. It was one thing to deal with a bunch of Imperial sympathizers--that he was used to. On the other hand, he had no training whatsoever in what to do with five Dark Force-users who hated him personally and the new Republic generally. 'You can't just put them in prison somewhere and you can't send them off into exile either.'

Luke ignited his lightsaber again. "Look at me, Errik."

The young student raised his head. "My Lord."

"Do you mean that?"

The boy spoke haltingly. "You are my Lord. You are strong even as my Master was strong. You are indeed his heir."

"Give me one reason why I should trust you alive."

Errik stared at him, bewildered.

Luke slowly lowered the emerald blade until it hovered just above the boy's shoulder. The student closed his eyes and tried to square his shoulders. Luke glanced up at Alais, whose eyes betrayed her otherwise impassive stance. "Why did you attack me? For my father's sake?"

"You appeared a Jedi..." the boy began.

"I am a Jedi."

"But you also know the Dark Side. We swore to our Master to serve his teaching even beyond our service to him."

"My father knew the Dark Side but he was also a Jedi. He died a Jedi. You were my father's student. He didn't have the chance to complete your

training. I intend to."

Luke snapped off the lightsaber and returned it to his belt. He continued, "You belonged to my father. Now you belong to me." He grimaced. Just what he always wanted...

Alais was looking at Luke with new respect. Except when she addressed the students, she never took her eyes from him. And there was something about her Force-presence--he was too preoccupied to bother to define it--that told Luke that she was now more comfortable with his authority. He might as well go all the way with it...

Luke allowed his gaze to meet hers. "And what about you, Alais?"

Errik seemed startled by the informal address, but Alais gave no indication of chagrin. She slowly came forward to stand beside the kneeling student. With the straight back of years of practice, she, too, went down on bended knee before Luke. She bowed her head a moment, then looked up at him and said gravely, "You are the Master here now." Was there a hint of a smile as she spoke?

Luke hastily extended a hand to her, intending to help her to rise. Instead, to his horror, she took it in both her hands and lowered her forehead to touch it. "My Lord," she murmured.

"Please rise," Luke managed. Alais let go of his hand, bowed her head once more, and rose.

As they again looked into one another's eyes, the Jedi realized that he could feel the depth and contour of Alais's Force-being. She was no longer blocking him. It made him relax slightly and the wave of fatigue that he had been holding back with his tension rushed forth. "Alais, for now, I will leave the wounded in your charge--and hold you responsible for their conduct. Errik, you will assist her."

Two immediate responses of "Yes, my Lord Vader." Just great.

Luke began to move past them toward the stairs. He turned to look over his shoulder at Alais. "I won't be at dinner tonight and I'd rather not be disturbed unless absolutely necessary." He headed up the stairs before any more honorifics could be issued.

It wasn't until Luke tried to pull off his shirt that he noticed that it was torn and that a bloody scrape on his arm showed through; the fine woven fabric was soaked with sweat and clung to his back and chest. He managed to wriggle out of it, only to have the breeze coming in from his opened window send a shiver through his damp body. He sat down heavily on the bed, got his boots off and rolled over, pulling the bed covers around him.

A sharp pain in the hip made him wonder if he hadn't taken that fall badly. Then he grimaced and sat up. He carefully removed his lightsaber from its place on his belt and placed it on the nightstand. With the blankets pulled tight around him, he again fell back onto the mattress.

Several bad dreams later, Luke was staring at the ceiling, or at least toward it in the now dark room. Darkness. All of his dreams had been about darkness...about Darkness. But also about Light.

Ever since he had arrived here he had found himself questioning the Force and all he knew about it. This latest bout with the Dark Side only frightened him more.

It was not the first time he had felt the Dark Side of the Force come to the fore within him. It gave him strength, power, and cunning at a time of fear, hatred, and anger, just as Master Yoda had warned him that negative emotions bred evil in the Force. But he hadn't felt evil--he had been fortified to defend...what?

Luke sat up, startled out of his reverie. "The Dark Side didn't subject me," he said with triumphant realization. "I used it!"

It still worried him that he had tapped this reserve of strength from so dangerous a well. But blasters and laser cannons were dangerous, too. Inimical in the wrong hands, desirable weapons on the side of right.

'Am I stronger than my father was, to be able to handle the Dark Side as much an ally as the Light?' That possibility had obviously never occurred to Masters Yoda and Kenobi.

The next morning, Luke had his valet inform the Lady Alais that Master Skywalker wished her to join him for breakfast. A light knock at the door to his apartment an hour later told him that his invitation had been accepted.

As he admitted her, he noticed that Alais was dressed much more simply than she had over the course of his stay. The Lady of the estate now appeared much more the ward of the estate. She wore a bright blue pleated dress. Her long hair was pinned in a knotted coil at the nape of her neck. Her grey eyes seemed to take on a touch of the blue serenity of her gown.

Luke smiled. Was it the clear sky that morning that had moved him also to choose a blue tunic and pants that day? He realized, not for the first time, that she reminded him of someone--only this time he thought he knew why. She was a cross between him and Leia. She was as blond and fair as he had been, growing up on Tatooine, but she had Leia's angular face and large eyes; she had his presence in the Force and Leia's bearing in the physical world. Had his father favored her because he saw in her the children he'd never known?

Alais nodded a deference. "Good morning, my..."

Luke cut her off. "Let's get one thing sorted out right now," he began somewhat nervously. "When we're with the other students, I suppose you should call me Master Skywalker--they will obviously need the reminder for a while. We, on the other hand, need to work together, so I would really prefer it if you would just call me Luke."

He waited a few seconds to be sure she wasn't

going to object, then smiled with relief. "Good morning, Alais."

"Good morning...Luke." She too smiled, if a bit self-consciously.

Luke led her to the small table in his work room which had been set for a light breakfast. "Where are the others this morning?" he asked as they sat down opposite one another.

"They are in the training hall, doing morning exercises."

Luke frowned. "I thought they worked out a lot earlier than this," he said, thinking of his own just-post-dawn routine.

"They do," replied Alais, her tone carefully even. "This morning they are doing an extra hour in penance for yesterday's atrocity. After that they will return to quarters for Force-control exercises and meditation until sent for." She seemed to be studying Luke for some reaction.

He didn't oblige her. "Your idea?" he asked, just as evenly.

"They agreed that some gesture was warranted. With the possible exception of Jamin, they are suitably contrite."

Luke thought about Jamin, the second-eldest student, the son of the Emperor's one-time Minister for Trade. 'He probably didn't like taking orders from Vader either,' Luke thought, making a mental note to be careful of this very Dark and, from what he could tell, ambitious young man.

"So, they've decided that I might not be such an unworthy fool of a Jedi after all?"

Alais either ignored or didn't catch Luke's light tone. "Actually, they are trying to figure out how it is that they are still alive. So am I."

Luke took a long drink of fruit juice. "I don't suppose my father would have withheld his anger. I am not my father. You'll have to decide for yourselves whether that's more bad or good."

"First I think we will need to know what you are," replied Alais.

"What do you mean?" Luke said--almost afraid to find out.

Alais appeared thoughtful. "My Lord Vader often said that in order to fully use the powers of the Force, of the Dark Side, you must accept it as your Master. He always knew when we faltered. He said he could feel it in the Force whenever the Darkness was breached. He was especially hard on those of us that hadn't been trained properly before we came here. And yet you, a Jedi of the Light, have such power in your use of the Dark patterns."

"Just because you have a skill doesn't mean that it has to dominate your being. I keep trying to tell you, my father wasn't always a Master of Darkness, and he never completely lost the Light in him."

How could he make her understand what even he

didn't truly understand? His father had been born, raised and trained in the Light, the Jedi son of a Jedi father. But he had become wrapped in a shroud of Darkness that smothered all brightness.

Luke thought of his encounters with his father. They had, except for the last few moments, been filled with evil. Still, he had always known that there was something of the Jedi left in his father. He had felt the core of goodness, like seeing the sun in the morning just barely visible through layers of haze.

He watched Alais eating quietly and it came to him that that was how she had first appeared to him, too. "Alais, you are the daughter of Jedi parents. The Light in you has only been dimmed by years of training and learned inclination to the Dark Side."

Alais shook her head. "I am what I am--and content with it. Why do you insist that the Jedi Way is better? There is glory in the Dark Side. We have seen it, felt it."

Glory? How do you answer glory?

Luke felt himself getting exasperated. "Alais, you must have learned to explore the Force within you, even if my father discouraged you from doing so. Look inside, Alais. Your true self is what you were before my father started to train you. Just as he had been a Jedi, you were once free of the Darkness, too. Your legacy is in the Light. You must...you can find it, Alais. My father did."

Alais studied Luke. "You say that my true place is on the Light Side of the Force because I was born there, even though I don't even remember what the Force felt like before my Lord began to train me."

"That's right," Luke responded immediately.

"My Lord Vader was surely with the Dark Side of the Force for a long time, even if, as you say, he became aware of the Light again before he died."

"That's right," said Luke. He wondered where this would lead.

"Then is not your true place, your legacy, where you were born--just as you say mine is?"

The shock of her words made Luke suddenly feel very cold. The powers of the Dark Side had come all too easily to him, even though he had certainly received no training in them. But the Jedi Way of the Light had to prevail. Didn't it?

"Luke?" Alais's prompting was spoken gently, yet hit him like a blow.

"What?"

Alais looked genuinely concerned for him. "Are you all right?"

Luke leaned back in his chair and gathered his self-control. "Yes. I'm fine." He took a chance. Looking up at the clock on the wall beside them he said, "It's getting late. I guess I'd better go let the prisoners out."

It worked. "As you say," Alais answered. "Do

you want me to come with you?"

"Please."

They got up from the table and Luke ushered Alais out the door. Luke had little doubt that she was aware of his failure to answer her question. And he would give her an answer--as soon as he figured one out for himself.

As they walked down the corridor, Luke decided to attend to another problem first. Procrastination? A few minutes away from the visual reminder of their conversation? Both probably. In any event, he sent Alais to summon the students to the sitting room in which they had first met. He himself headed for the guard command post on the first floor, near the main entrance.

As Luke entered the room, the senior officer snapped to attention at his position at a communications console. "Good morning, Sir," he said, perhaps a bit uneasily.

"Good morning, Robb. Anything happening?" As the Commander winced, Luke realized that he had unintentionally asked what could have been taken as a snide question. Oh, well. This wasn't going to be pleasant anyway.

"Sit down, Robb," he said, indicating the chair behind the Commander's desk. Luke himself sat down in the armchair on the other side of the desk.

Robb leaned his arms on the desk. "About yesterday, Sir..." He let it trail off, as though he didn't have any idea what to say about 'yesterday.'

"I was wondering," Luke began quietly. "Where the hell was everybody at about nineteen hours yesterday?"

Robb swallowed hard. "The four outside guards were at their posts. The four house patrol were, um, checking out a disturbance on the third level."

"A disturbance?"

"Yes, Sir. Lieutenant Marshall reported that he heard some kind of fight going on in the exercise room." Robb looked resolutely at Luke. "It turned out to be a recording device."

Luke shook his head. "Great. And the rest?"

"Kerrekin was here with me and the rest were on meal break in the small dining room, Sir."

"And nobody heard six people crashing around in the west wing of the second level?" Luke felt and sounded thoroughly disgusted.

Robb didn't mince words. "No, Sir."

"I might as well have left Vader's guards on duty, for all the good you all did me. I was ambushed by five of the six most suspect occupants of this household and none of you thought to show up until two-and-a-half hours later, when Kerrekin woke me out of a sound sleep to ask if I was all right. I'm surprised he didn't wake me up to ask if I was dead!"

Once having exploded, Luke realized that the Commander was looking disconsolate. Robb was a friend; they had flown together during the war. When Luke had left for the Sith, Robb had volunteered to lead the guard detail and Luke had been glad to have him along. He half-smiled. "Lecture over. How do we fix it?"

Robb relaxed as Luke did, but, instead of smiling, he scowled at the Jedi. "I begged you to let me assign a personal guard to you. I even offered to do the job myself. You insisted you could 'take care of yourself,' that you didn't want or need a watchdog."

"I can take care of myself. I did, didn't I?" Luke protested, then realized he was arguing with himself. "Okay. You win. But, er, discreetly?"

"You won't even know we're there," Robb promised.

Luke stood up. "Thanks, Robb." He turned toward the door, but Robb stopped him.

"Aren't you forgetting something, Luke?" He grinned, reached over to activate an intercom set, and spoke into it. "Marshall, pick up Lord Skywalker at the comm center." He released the switch, cutting off the "Yes, Sir" coming from the speaker. A minute later, Luke and his new shadow walked through the corridor to the meeting room.

Luke instructed Lieutenant Marshall to wait outside the door, then braced himself and went in. The students were ranged around the room, two on the sofa, one leaning against the wall by the window, and two in the chairs by the fireplace.

Alais came to meet him as he entered. She bowed her head briefly. "Master Skywalker," she said softly, "we are at your service."

Luke smiled uneasily. "Thank you, Alais."

He looked from one student to another, trying to get some idea of how they were feeling. Except for Errik, however, they were as solidly shielded against him as before. The Jedi did note that the mood of the Force in the room was not entirely hostile. The angry Darkness was punctuated by... fear?

All of the students had gotten to their feet when Luke arrived. The one female student among them now stepped forward. She glanced briefly at Alais, then addressed Luke. "Does our Master require obeisance?"

"No," Luke responded all too quickly. Although he hated even the thought of it, he continued, "Let that wait until you can give it willingly. In fact, why don't you all sit down so we can talk. The first thing we need to do is to get to know one another--and trust one another."

Not a waver in the Force, though two of the students did sit back down on the sofa. "There will be no recriminations for what happened yesterday. However, I insist that you listen to what I have to say and obey my orders. You challenged me because you thought I only knew the Light Side of the Force. Well, I challenge all of you now to learn the ways of both sides of the Force. Otherwise you'll be

just as half-blind--and weak--as you assumed I was."

Luke had the satisfaction of seeing a few of the students shift nervously. He also noticed that Alais, who had taken a seat to his left, was listening intently. "Why do you assume weakness on the Light Side? Was that something my father taught you?"

No response, not that he really expected any. "Has it occurred to you that this rebellion proved just how strong the Light Side of the Force could be against the Dark? Only my commitment to the Light Side enabled me to resist the Emperor's attempts to enslave me. And my father turned back to the Light Side to defeat the Emperor."

"My Lord Vader despised the Emperor," interrupted a voice to Luke's right. It was Jamin, the student Alais had mentioned as being more recalcitrant than the rest. "He was always planning to attack Palpatine. How can you be so sure he did it in the Light..."

He was cut off by Errik. "Let Master Skywalker finish what he has to say."

"Why should I? Why should any of us listen to him?" Jamin's anger reverberated in the Force. "Lord Vader never spoke of a son. Where the hell has he been till now? Off somewhere learning the Jedi Way. Now he wants us to learn the meek ways of the Light--but you noticed he used Dark Side powers yesterday when we confronted him."

"Yes," broke in Alais, "and he could have destroyed all of you with those powers. You owe him your life, Jamin. At least give him your obedience."

Luke made the most of the momentary lull. He approached Jamin, realizing too late the disadvantage of having to look up at the tall, darkhaired student. "All right, Jamin. You don't want to study with me. You don't want to learn about the Light Side. What do you want to do?"

"I am leaving this place," Jamin announced with a sneer. "My Lord Vader had intended for us to help him defeat the Emperor and take power. The Emperor is gone. It is for those who are strongest to rule."

"And that, of course, means you," Luke said skeptically. "It doesn't matter. I forbid you to leave."

"And just how are you going to stop me?"

"I knew he was going to say that." He adopted a more rigid stance and strengthened his resolve in the Force. "I will do anything I have to."

But would he? Luke knew that he could never allow this hot-headed Dark Force-user to leave the Sith. He had to make him stay, or kill him. To let him go would only mean having to chase him down at some future date.

Jamin drew his lightsaber; it glowed a vibrant red. The others in the room scattered to the far corners. Alais and Errik called on Jamin to listen to reason.

Luke tried to banish the image of Vader's ruby



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saber. He shook his head and took two steps back, toward the center of the room. Plenty of open floor space. They might need it. "I will not fight you, Jamin. That would prove nothing."

"Then you prove yourself a coward, Jedi." Jamin took a menacing, but not serious, swipe at Luke with his saber. Luke easily avoided the blade.

Luke thought about drawing his lightsaber. Ben had called it the weapon of a Jedi Knight. Luke had watched Kenobi cut down the fugitive in the cantina in Mos Eisley and had never questioned whether that was Light or Dark--he hadn't even known about the difference then. And Kenobi had fought Vader with his lightsaber. But lately--yesterday, with the students, when fighting Vader on the new Death Star and, yes, when hacking his way through Jabba's guards on Tatooine--whenever Luke used his lightsaber in battle, he slipped into the Dark Side of the Force.

Jamin took a few steps forward and slashed at Luke. The Jedi used the Force to jump back several feet. Errik made a move to intercede, but Luke waved him off. This had to be his fight. And fought on the Light Side if he was ever to convince Jamin, the other students...or himself...that the Light could be stronger than the Dark.

'How do I fight within the Light?' Luke wondered as he moved warily to his left as Jamin approached on his right. He knew how to fight on the Dark Side--throw anger and lightning at people. Masters Yoda and Kenobi had told him never to use the Force--the Light--for aggression. Always to be passive. Sure. They had always described the Force in non-physical terms; it was something to feel, not use. Luke only thought about the Dark when he was using it. All right then, the Dark Side was more physical and active than the Light. The Light was passive. 'Fight passively?'

Luke ducked under the next blow, let himself hit the floor, and rolled twice before leaping to his feet, knocking over one of the chairs near the fireplace. Jamin advanced on him, trying to trap him against the mantel. Before he could attack, the Jedi surged upward, leaping over his opponent and landing behind him. He barely heard the appreciative noises of the spectators.

It occurred to Luke that his teachers had always taken the Light's desirable nature for granted and had never explained what it really was. 'What is the Light?' Luke could only deal in the negatives left to him by a lack of definition. Light was the opposite of Dark. The opposite of fear, anger and hate--trust, compassion and love. Through gritted teeth, Luke smiled.

"I won't fight you, Jamin," Luke said again. "I could kill you, but I won't because all life is important, particularly the life of a talented Force-user. I won't take that life."

The student had whirled around so that he again faced the Jedi; if nothing else, Jamin appeared perplexed. As he wavered slightly in the Force, Luke pressed on. "My father cared for you enough to hide you away here and train you. I cared for my father, so I care for those who were important to him."

They circled slowly, Jamin sidestepping the chair that Luke had overturned. "You can't leave here," Luke said. "This is your home; you must feel something for it. And what about the other students? Don't you feel anything for them? You'll be all alone out there with no one who cares anything about you."

"Shut up and fight," Jamin snarled. He ran at Luke with outstretched lightsaber.

Luke considered knocking him to one side. Even as he raised his arm, he felt the Dark Side of the Force rise in him. He denied it a hold on him and, instead, simply glided out of Jamin's way. "Don't you have any loyalty to the others, any responsibility to this place? You're only thinking about yourself." Yes, the Dark Side was also selfish.

They continued their wary movement around the room. Luke kept using the Force to move himself clear of Jamin's attacks. Jamin responded with wilder strokes of the blade. "What about your responsibility to the Lady Alais?" The Jedi continued. "She was your Master's ward and the Lady of these estates. Are you just going to pack up and abandon her to someone you claim is wrong, weak, and misguided? Don't you care anything about what happens to her?"

As Jamin began to falter in the Force, Luke's words became more impassioned. "Don't you trust anyone? Did you trust your Master? He embraced the Light and gave up his life to save mine--so that I could go on living on the Light Side of the Force."

Luke hesitated, stunned. Did he dare believe the words that had come to him in the clarity of the Force? If so, his father's legacy was the freedom he himself had lost so long ago.

Joy in that realization enhanced Luke's concentration in the Force. He eluded Jamin's next thrust by jumping easily over the low table in front of the sofa. "I know the Dark Side--but it doesn't dominate me. I can choose to use it or not. My father thought enough of you to train you, and he obviously only trained the best. Was he mistaken? Are you strong enough to learn to use the Light Side also? Are you brave enough? He knew both. I know both. Can you? Do you dare?"

If it was possible to throw goodness at someone, Luke did so. Incredibly, the lightsaber dimmed to a pale pinkish hue, narrowed and then went out altogether. Jamin stared at it, and tried in vain to ignite it again.

The Jedi extended his hand. Jamin walked the few steps forward to the table as though in a trance. Trembling, he placed the now useless weapon in his Master's hand, then stepped back.

Luke took a few moments to reassure himself that the battle--both with Jamin and himself--was over. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, settling himself in the Force. No, settling the Force within him.

He was no longer a pawn of the Force. He was its Master. For the first time since he had been awakened to the Force on Tatooine, he sensed its pattern, its balance...and its place in him.

Finally, the Jedi again became aware of the others in the room. They had all gathered around the table. To his surprise, in addition to the students and Alais, he found Robb, Lieutenant Marshall, and two other guards standing self-consciously at the edge of the group.

Robb raised an eyebrow. Luke shrugged back at him. "I told you I could take care of myself," he said with a laugh.

Alais stood nearest to Luke. She was watching him with a fascination that Luke hesitated to term awe. "Alais, I owe you an apology," he began, to her amazement. "I tried to coerce you into wanting to turn to the Light, just because you had been born in the Light. I was wrong. How a person is born or raised or trained means nothing. It provides legacy but not destiny. You asked me my true nature in the Force. Now I can answer you: I was born to Darkness, but I choose the Light. You can be anything you want to be--it's not easy, it takes a lot of strength and willpower--but it can be done."

"You've shown me a lot to think about, my Lord," she said wistfully. "But one thing I am sure of is that I want to be everything I can be. I would be honored to learn about the Light from you, so that I, too, can make my choice."

Luke gestured around the circle with the lightsaber still in his hand. "All of you: you can't choose unless you know both sides. Will you try--or will you remain slaves to your limited knowledge?"

Errik was the first to speak up. "Yesterday you gave me my life," he said. "I would gladly give myself to your teaching."

One by one, the students agreed to begin training in the Jedi Way of the Light. Jamin, last of all, came forward and knelt to Luke. "If you would be willing to have me as your student, I would learn the totality of the Force."

Luke nodded. "Then stand up and take this back," he said, extending the lightsaber. Jamin did, and, as it left his hand, Luke felt the gloom in the Force that had pervaded the room lift a little. It would take time. But now they had time.

Ten days later, Luke and Alais sat in Vader's office--Luke's office, now. They talked about the Force, the past and the man Luke knew as Dark Lord but called Father, and whom Alais knew as a father but called Lord. Luke found he no longer resented her closeness to Vader but was, instead, grateful for the insights she could provide him.

Luke was drawn to Alais. He had never before had a comrade his own age in the Force. She had always felt apart from the other students. Luke tried to keep his role as her teacher apart from their fledgling friendship.

"I remember when I was very young," Alais said, "my Lord would return sometimes in the middle of the night, after I had gone to sleep. When I woke up in the morning, instead of being in bed, I would be in his lap as he sat, sleeping, in the big armchair in my room."

Luke smiled at the image. Not long ago, he never would have believed such a story. But the more he heard of Darth Vader, the more he found of Anakin Skywalker in him. "That can't have been comfortable," he said.

"I didn't notice. He was so big and I was so small. I was very disappointed that I didn't grow as big as he was, even though he warned me he doubted I would." Alais looked appraisingly at Luke. "And here I always thought it was because I wasn't really his daughter."

Luke grimaced at her. "Gee, thanks. Besides, my sister is even shorter than I am." Alais looked skeptical. "Anyway, you were much more his child than either of us ever were."

"I do wish you had known him better. He was a good father when I was growing up and a good Master more recently."

"You must miss him, now."

"I miss his presence in the Force. He was away so much since the rebellion escalated. I got used to not seeing him here, but I could always find him. From what you've told me, I believe he has changed greatly from the way I knew him. When he's ready, if he can, I hope he will reach out in the Force." She smiled at Luke. "I would like him to know that I have changed also."

"I know what you mean. I'd like to hear from him, too."

Alais looked thoughtful. "Maybe we have."

"Huh?"

Her smile widened. "From each other."

Luke grinned back. He reached across the desk to where Alais had been toying with a well-worn paperweight and laid his hand over hers. They looked at one another for a moment, then Luke withdrew his hand. "Speaking of hearing from people, if I don't finish this tape to my sister tonight, I'm not going to be able to send it with Marshall when the troops leave tomorrow morning." They bade each other good night.

After Alais left, Luke stared a while at the door. How different Alais and Leia were, and yet how alike. Leia had grown up in the public eye, sure of her place and her mission in life. Alais had been kept apart from others and trusted to her guardian to direct her future. And yet both were strong, self-assured, capable...beautiful...

Leia. He had practically worshiped her when they had first met. She was everything he wasn't and admired. But she'd taught him to take pride in his accomplishments and helped him to see his own strengths. And with self-confidence came the courage to love. But the Force hadn't been with him.

Luke flipped on the recorder and played back the last few lines of his status report to the Senate commission that had granted him the estates. He then picked up the attached comlink and spoke softly into it.

"I won't be coming back for a while, Leia.
I've found that more than anything else I want to
train Je--Force-users. I can't do the Senate any
good, and there are students here who need me. Robb
wants to stay here with us. I'd be grateful if you
would arrange an honorable discharge from the Fleet
for him.

"When things settle down, please come to visit.
It's time you got some training, too. I've figured
out a lot more about the Force since I've been here.
I really think I'm ready now to pass on what I've
learned..." ✱



If Your Eyes Could See

If your eyes could see
What they've done to me
You wouldn't waste your time anymore,
Shooting at shadows, trying to get it right
Through an unforgiving night.

If your heart could feel
What it's like to kneel
When you want to stand and shout,
"I am alive, Goddamnit! Look at me!"
But they're not supposed to see.

If your mind could learn
How the dark can burn--
How it purifies your soul!
Gives you the power to see things so clear!
The perspective's right from here.

Can you comprehend,
Now at the end,
Something about time?
Has the rain ever made you cry?
Almost time to die...

They gave me everything,
Everything but time, while the past
Is shadows that dance on the borders of my mind.
It happened so fast.
It left me behind.

But at least I could tell you,
And you would remember me--
If your eyes could only see...
If your eyes could only see.

Martie Benedict

HIPPOCRATES' TRUST

PATRICIA C. NOLAN

The steady beat of the diagnostic panel above the bed forced itself into Spock's consciousness. Slowly he opened his eyes, looked around. He was alone. The other two beds in the small ward stood empty. Sarek. . .the Captain. . .

The sedative Chapel had given him during the operation still floated in his system, disorienting him, rendering his thoughts sluggish. The last thing he could remember was lying in the operating room while McCoy worked over Sarek.

Sarek. The alien intruder. What had happened during his period of unconsciousness? Automatically, he sent out a questing thought tendril. A wave of emptiness overwhelmed him as full awareness struck.

The door hissed open. Spock turned his head as Amanda entered the room. Her face was tear-stained but composed.

"Mother?"

She shook her head in the human gesture of negation. No words were necessary. He had known the moment he had awakened. Sarek was dead. Even though his father had severed the full bond between them eighteen years previously, when he had learned his son was to enter Starfleet, there had remained the residual link that always existed between those who had once shared emotional or blood ties. Now even that was gone, and a new emptiness, more profound than any caused by the cold silence that had developed between father and son, had replaced it.

McCoy had been correct. The operation was too difficult for an inexperienced human, one unfamiliar with the Vulcan cardiovascular system.

Amanda's mouth moved but there was no sound.

"I grieve with thee," Spock said formally, fighting his own sorrow. There had been no time to speak privately with Sarek before the operation; there were things that had had to be said between them and now never would.

"And I with thee, my Son," Amanda replied in formal High Vulcan.

Tears welled up in her Terran-sea-blue eyes. Spock felt her struggle for control, but even

without their bond he would have known she was torn. Her face clearly showed her emotions warring with the imposed Vulcan way of peace she had so hardly won. Spock closed his eyes and concentrated on shutting out her roiling emotions, but they beat upon his mental shields like an injured silver-bird seeking sanctuary. He could not give her the comfort she sought: it was not his way.

"His loss will be keenly felt at the Council Table," he said as he opened his eyes once more.

"And by his clan."

The formalities dispensed with, Amanda approached his bed and sat down in a chair which rested beside it. The memory caught Spock's mind, a dream bubble out of time. Just so had she so often acted when he was a child.

"I beg thy forgiveness, Mother," he whispered, turning his face away from her.

"There is nothing to forgive, Spock." He shook off the solicitous hand she laid on his arm, afraid of the emotional turbulence her touch awakened.

"Had I gone to McCoy immediately, when the doctor first wanted to operate, Sarek would still be alive."

"The time factor wasn't enough, Spock. You can't blame yourself. These things happen."

"You said I could save my father if I gave up my duty and supplied the blood necessary for the operation. I did not do so; I retained command until Captain Kirk relieved me, thus delaying the operation. I am responsible for Sarek's death."

"No, you're not."

"You said--"

"I don't care what I said. I was wrong. I was frustrated--angry at fate for Sarek's illness and for my helplessness to aid him, furious at you for putting your oath before his life. I loved Sarek, and would have sacrificed anything and everything to preserve his life. I lashed out at you because you were there, and felt obliged not to help him. Spock, I love you too."

He turned to face her, witnessing a momentary war between concern for him and her grief over Sarek's loss. "I spoke in haste, my son, and my words were meant to force you to act as I wished, rather than as you felt your integrity demanded. But I can't let you feel guilty for your actions. I spoke to Sarek after I left your cabin. He was proud of you, Spock, even if he would have fainted rather than ever admit it to anyone. But I knew. Just as I know how much you loved him. It was stubbornness that kept you both apart. Don't let your feelings separate us, please."

He had nothing to say in reply and a short silence descended on the room, broken only by the hum of the diagnostic panel above his head. There was much to contemplate in her words, but he did not have the energy to ponder them now.

"How do you feel, Spock?"

The change of subject caught him by surprise and he answered with a silent sigh of relief.

"Well enough to return to my duties, Mother, if Dr. McCoy will release me." He sat up too quickly and the room spun around, making him nauseous. He lay back down, forcing his heart to slow down, embarrassed over this display of physical weakness before his mother.

"Shall I get the doctor?" Fear was superimposed over Amanda's sorrow, forcing him to realize the strain she was under--she was facing the possibility of losing him as well as Sarek.

"Not necessary," he hastened to reassure her. He paused, concern growing for the woman who had once served as his buffer from the world. "Mother, how are you feeling?"

"Oh, Spock. . ." The battle was lost. Tears rolled unchecked down her face. "I'm sorry, I'm acting foolishly."

"Negative." His voice softened and he raised one hand to wipe away the tears. "It is a normal human reaction, Mother. I see no shame in it."

"That's not the point. I'm crying because the loss hurts, dammit, and I want you to cry also. Release your pain."

The door slid open and McCoy entered.

Spock ignored the doctor's approach to say, "I grieve according to the Vulcan Way."

"Do you?"

He refused to listen to any doubts in his mind. "Affirmative."

"Spock, can't you at least try to listen to Amanda," McCoy interjected as he reached the bed and studied the comp readout on the diagnostic panel.

Impassively, the Vulcan stared at him, but said nothing.

Tears streaming down her face, Amanda turned from the bed.

"Would you like something to help you sleep?" McCoy asked her gently.

She shook her head as the doors dilated open, then walked from the room. The door swished shut behind her, hiding her from Spock's view.

"Spock," McCoy said, "you really have to--"

"I do not wish to discuss the issue further at this time. I will. . ." He lost his battle with the sedative and his eyes closed. "Later," he muttered sleepily.

"Goddammit, Spock, you can't keep the hurt and pain bottled up inside you." The words drifted toward him as if from a great distance, but they meant nothing to him and awareness fled.

Spock awoke early the next morning, his system cleared of all drugs. He sat up carefully; feeling quite well, he decided to release himself from sick-bay without waiting for Dr. McCoy's approval. Rising from the bed, he began dressing.

McCoy entered the ward just as he was pulling on his second boot.

"Who told you to get up?" McCoy demanded.

"I feel perfectly well, Doctor, and I have much to do. Since the Captain is still convalescing, I must interrogate our prisoner."

McCoy sighed in resignation. "That Andorian . . . sorry, he was actually an Orion surgically altered to pass as an Andorian."

Spock nodded thoughtfully. "I had surmised as much, but your potion knocked me out before I could give my information to Captain Kirk. But you said was. Why?"

"He killed himself. Slow poison. I found out his true race when I performed my autopsy."

The two lapsed into a silence made ominous by its length.

"Tell me what happened to Sarek," Spock asked finally.

"I don't know if you're strong enough to--"

"If you do not give me the information I want immediately, Doctor, I will get it from the computer."

McCoy searched Spock's face almost questioningly, then, glancing away, he said, "The operation was unsuccessful. . . I simply didn't have the necessary skills. Sarek died on the table." Pausing, the doctor drew a deep breath, then added, "I. . . I'm sorry." He turned once more to Spock, laid a hand on Spock's sleeve.

Spock ignored the plea in the human's pale blue eyes. "Your sympathy is unnecessary," he replied, shrugging away McCoy's hand. "You should have permitted Dr. M'Benga to assist you."

"M'Benga?" McCoy frowned, quite obviously not following Spock's train of logic.

"He interned in a Vulcan ward, Doctor. Or had you forgotten?"

McCoy appeared stunned. It was several minutes before he spoke.

"That doesn't mean anything, Spock, and you know it. He's never participated in a cryogenic open-heart operation. There's a world of difference between practice and theory."

"Yet, he does have more training in Vulcan physiology than you have." Spock paused, unable to continue impassively under the waves of undesired emotion that threatened to inundate him.

McCoy rubbed his palm across his face. "Spock," he said, this time almost pleadingly, "M'Benga is inexperienced. This is his first starship assignment, and since he's never operated under battle conditions, I was afraid he'd fold in an emergency." He shrugged. "Besides, I'm so used to caring for you myself, that I--"

"I am only half Vulcan, Doctor."

McCoy's mouth tightened. "Dammit, Spock, you know you're almost one hundred percent Vulcan physiologically. The only differences are in those human blood elements and in a couple of unimportant genes."

Finished dressing, Spock stood up. "You could have called on M'Benga's expertise as a consultant without risking an inability to work under pressure."

McCoy shook his head as though reeling from a punch. Disbelievingly, he said, "You knew I was going to do the operation, and you didn't object then."

"I had confidence in your ability." Spock looked McCoy fully in the eye for the first time since the doctor had entered the room.

McCoy licked his lips. "I admitted my inexperience. Both you and Ambassador Sarek agreed that my performing the operation was the only chance for Sarek's survival. I did everything I could, Commander. I'm not a god with the power of life and death, you know. I'm just a simple country doctor."

"Precisely." Spock drew himself to attention, staring down at the human, who backed away a half-step. "I am filing a complaint with the Surgeon General's Office concerning your actions in regard to Ambassador Sarek's fatal illness."

The lonely chirp of the diagnostic panel sounded abnormally loud in the tense silence. "What kind of complaint? Based on what?" McCoy demanded, stunned.

"Malpractice, negligence, and gross incompetence," Spock replied in a calm and unruffled tone, belying the tumult he still stored within. "Your handling of Sarek's final illness was most illogical. I shall see that, if you are allowed to continue medicine, you at least never treat another Vulcan again." Spock put his hands behind his back

so McCoy would not see them tighten into fists. "I have always distrusted your form of treatment, Dr. McCoy. I regret that it had to be Ambassador Sarek who suffered because of it." With that he turned on his heel and strode toward the door.

"Oh, God," he heard the doctor mutter. "What will I--what--Spock. . ."

Whatever McCoy intended to say was cut off by the closing door.

Spock reported to the bridge and took over command from Scott. Two hours later, a call came through Uhura's station.

Turning to him, she said, "You have a call, Mr. Spock."

"Who is it, Lieutenant?"

She frowned. "The Captain, sir."

Spock schooled his face to impassivity. The Captain had probably seen McCoy by now. "I will take it from my station," he replied, rising and walking to the library computer. He held the small communication unit to his ear and adjusted the reception level. "Spock here, Captain. I trust you are--"

"I want to talk to you, Spock. In person." Kirk's filtered voice interrupted before he could ask about the human's health.

"I am on duty, sir. I will be down to see you when I am off-duty."

"Now." Kirk's voice held an edge of impatience.

"Sir, I am sorry, but it will have to wait until my duty shift is over," Spock replied stiffly.

There was a pause. Spock could almost see Kirk's mouth tightening in angry frustration. "I expect to see you as soon as you leave the bridge, Mister Spock," Kirk said finally. He abruptly canceled his call, and Spock stared at the computer console thoughtfully. Kirk had most definitely sounded annoyed. McCoy must have indeed informed the Captain of Spock's accusation. Spock shrugged mentally. That was something he would have to deal with in its own time. Meanwhile, he had a ship to run.

Rather than face Captain Kirk, Spock remained on duty for the second shift, salving his conscience by telling himself they were still technically in a crisis situation and he was needed on the bridge. Midway through the watch, he realized he had made a serious mistake: he was still weak from the after-effects of the drugs and the tensions of the previous day's operation. When the shift ended at 1200 hours he felt too exhausted for anything but sleep. Telling himself that Kirk would understand, and that he could always see the Captain after his sleep period, Spock went straight to his quarters.

He had undressed and begun his nightly meditation when the door buzzer overrode his thoughts. Startled, he was slow in answering the summons.

"Who is it?"

"Amanda. May I speak with you?"

"Come."

He rose from his chair as his mother entered the room, but reseated himself at her gesture. Amanda sat in the chair opposite him.

"Mother, I have finished the arrangements for Father's Ki'varr. I presume you will accompany his ashes to Vulcan, before returning to Terra?"

Amanda shook her head. "I shall continue on to Babel. Sarek's Ki'varr will have to wait until after the conference. T'Pol has sent word that the High Council has certified me as Vulcan's representative at the conference. I am conversant with Sarek's wishes in this matter and will cast Vulcan's vote as he would have done." There was a pause, almost as if Amanda were wondering what to say next. Then she said, "When the conference is over, I shall return to Vulcan."

Spock blanked all emotion from his face, but Amanda's startled expression made it evident that he had not done so quickly enough. He cleared his throat. "I had expected you to return to your own home, Mother."

Amanda smiled gently. "Vulcan is my home, Spock. I've spent forty years there, raised a son there, and hope one day to see him raise a family there. Nothing remains for me on Earth. I am going home to ShiKahr."

Spock steepled his fingers and regarded her thoughtfully. "The memories will be painful. Would it not be more logical to live where it will be easier for you? Where you will not be surrounded by reminders of Sarek?"

Amanda regarded him calmly. "Spock, wherever I go, I'll 'be surrounded by reminders of Sarek.' I shall remember him always. I'll forever be wishing he could still share my joys and sorrows, and wanting him to see new things with me." Shaking her head, she folded her hands gently in her lap. "I shall never forget your father, nor would I want to. I have only one home--the one I shared with him."

Spock studied Amanda's composed face. She, a fully emotional being, could deal with her loss. Why could he not do the same? The battle to contain his grief was depleting his emotional control, and he did not know what to do about it. Meditation had not helped, but he knew he had to do something to control his hurt, his pain, his rage at himself.

"Mother," he asked softly, bowing his head. "How do . . . I . . . I am a Vulcan. . ." He tightened his lips, frowning at the effort to control his emotions. He must not permit them to overcome him.

There was a rustle of fabric and then Amanda was standing beside him. Her fingers rested lightly on his trembling hands.

"Spock, give in to your sorrow."

"I cannot. I am. . . Vulcan."

"You're also human. Stop repressing that side of your personality before you make yourself sick. Express what you feel. You and I both know that Sarek's death hurts. You can't keep the hurt bottled up inside you. I can't stand by and watch you destroy yourself because you're too stubborn to admit that you do have feelings. Let them out."

He shuddered. "How?"

Amanda held his hand gently, as though afraid to disturb the fragility of the moment. "Relax, Spock. Don't be self-conscious. We're alone here, and no one will ever know that you're--that you're the very human Mr. Spock." Her smile was watery, and very gentle.

"I. . ." He broke off, feeling his defenses crumble. Amanda knelt to embrace him, enfolding him in the safety of her arms--the refuge he had shunned since he was five years old. A sob was wrenched from his throat. "He almost forgave me," he gasped, shuddering uncontrollably.

Amanda drew him closer. Her gentle hands massaged his back, comforting him. Through the physical contact he felt her love for him, and for his father. She laughed weakly. "He forgave you a long time ago, Spock. He was just too stubborn to tell you so, or to express his pride in your accomplishments. And you couldn't bend enough to seek reconciliation with him."

"Stubbornness is a human trait," Spock muttered.

She laughed once again, this time more strongly. "It's a Vulcan one, also. I've lived too long among Vulcans not to know the depth and violence of their emotions. Those emotions may be unacknowledged and buried deeply, Spock, but they're there. You've got to stop fighting them, and learn to live with them. You must grieve as you feel. Face your feelings, no matter how much they hurt. And they will hurt, I know."

"Do you?" he choked, suddenly feeling as if he would drown under decades of suppressed emotions. "Do you really know the pain?"

Amanda nodded. With a tender gesture she had not used since his Kahswan, she brushed the hair back from his forehead. "Yes, Spock, I do. I'm torn between two worlds, too, just as you are. I chose to follow the Vulcan Way, although no one, least of all your father, would have condemned me had I not so chosen. It is not an easy path to follow, especially for a child of two worlds, but it is our way. And it is just as important to know when to leave the path, as it is to have the courage to follow it. Let go."

"I cannot," Spock said. Even as he spoke, the tears rolled down his cheeks. Amanda wrapped him in her arms and he held her tightly, sobbing as he had never done before, unable to say anything while the torrent spent itself. Amanda continued to hold him gently until the emotional storm ceased. With a final gasp he sat up straighter in his chair and readjusted his nightrobe.

Amanda climbed to her feet and looked at him thoughtfully. "Will you be all right now, Spock?"

Embarrassed over his loss of control, he turned his face away from her and began apologizing for his behavior.

"There's nothing to be ashamed of, Spock. The emotions have always been there, buried deep within."

"But I am a Vulcan. . ." he protested, looking back at her.

An almost natural smile lightened her face. "Don't you think Vulcans have emotions, too?"

He stared at her without comprehension.

"I thought as much." She shook her head. "Didn't you ever watch your father when you were young?"

He could not understand the meaning of her question. "Of course. Young males learn their adult role from carefully copying the patterns of their male parent-figure. It is only natural that--"

Amanda put her hand out to him. "No, Spock, you only copied the behavior that you thought should be there. Sarek never hid his feelings. He controlled, them, true, only letting them peek through in subtle ways, but they were there; and they exist in all Vulcans. If you hadn't blinded yourself to the world around you while you sought an impossible ideal, you would have seen what I, an unbiased outside observer--at least at the first--have always seen. Control does not mean negation, Spock."

Spock, startled, stared at her in silence. Her words sounded--right somehow. Had his whole life, his many sacrifices of emotion, of feeling--yes, even of friendship and love--been for a faulty goal? But then. . .

Amanda, returning to her chair, broke the silence.

"What are you going to do about Doctor McCoy?"

Still shaken, Spock replied, "I--I have determined to report his inefficiency to his superiors."

Amanda put out a protesting hand. "Revenge won't bring Sarek back, Spock."

"It is justice I seek, Mother, not revenge. I cannot take the chance that yet another Vulcan will die at Dr. McCoy's hands."

Gently, almost chidingly, Amanda shook her head. "He did everything possible for Sarek. . . more. He was willing to gamble on the unknown."

"Such behavior is unacceptable when a life is at stake," Spock said sharply.

"Without the operation Sarek would have died. With McCoy's operation the odds were forty-eight to one that Sarek would live."

"Forty-eight point six," Spock whispered.

"The precise odds don't matter, Spock. What does matter is that you're letting Sarek's death destroy your friendship with McCoy. You need people. You can't continue to exist on an island of loneliness among those who would offer you friendship." She paused, clearly marshaling her thoughts, then continued, "McCoy gave you that drug, on your insistence, against his own better judgment. I saw his concern for you, and for Sarek. Using the drug was the only way to operate, and he took that chance, slim as it was, but he worried constantly that he would lose you--lose you both. I saw him, Spock. I saw him pacing back and forth, checking and rechecking the monitors, reviewing the data tapes on the drug experiments, refusing to leave sickbay to sleep or eat until you awoke. He did his best for your father, but doctors aren't miracle workers. As a scientist you should understand that. Stop blaming McCoy. Stop blaming yourself. Sarek's death was no one's fault."

Spock tried to reestablish the seemingly logical argument he had prepared for himself. "There were other precautions he could have taken."

"Were there? Did you give him any chance to explain?"

"He offered only the fact that he--"

She leaned forward. "Don't let your anger and guilt over Sarek's death cloud your judgment, Spock. Speak to Dr. McCoy. Talk to him. You may realize he did everything he could under the circumstances."

It was all too much. Spock nodded weakly. "I will consider it."

She frowned thoughtfully and studied his face for several seconds. Then, as though satisfied with what she saw there, she stood.

"I must finish packing. There's still much to do before we arrive at Babel tomorrow. Will you come home for the Ki'varr?"

"I shall try. My duty may interfere with my desires. But I will return home as soon as I can obtain leave."

Amanda smiled. Bending, she kissed him lightly on the forehead. The action stirred up more memories of his childhood and of times when he had not understood the meaning behind her actions. When his reverie ended she was gone.

Perhaps I am wrong. Mother may have a point. Perhaps I--perhaps I acted too hastily and in anger or guilt, not from logic. If so, then restitution must be made.

He spent the rest of the night thinking about Amanda's words. He had made up his mind by the time he had to go on duty the next day.

Spock arrived on the bridge the next day to find Kirk sitting in the command chair. The Captain looked quite well, considering how close a call he had had.

"Good morning, Captain," Spock greeted, walking toward his library computer station.

Kirk rose from his chair and followed him.
"Spock, I'm sorry about your father. His death is a great loss to Vulcan, and to the Federation."

"Yes," Spock agreed, turning to face his commander. "His loss will be keenly felt. Ambassador Sarek's influence was a necessary stabilizing force for the council at Babel, and his plea for moderation will be sorely missed."

"If you need some time off. . ."

Spock raised a single brow. "Why should I wish to be relieved of my duties?"

Kirk frowned in puzzlement. "Surely you'll want time to mourn in private?"

"I am Vulcan, Captain," Spock reminded Kirk. "We Vulcans deal with the death of another in a most logical way. We do not 'mourn' as humans do."

Kirk looked as if he did not believe Spock's statement but did not pursue the subject. "How's your mother taking it?"

"Taking it?"

Kirk frowned once more, almost as though unsure of how to take Spock's pedantry. He started to say something, then caught himself, finally contenting himself with asking, "How's she handling your father's death? I haven't had a chance to see her since Sarek's operation, and I want to offer her my condolences."

Spock bowed his head slightly. "The Lady Amanda is dealing with Ambassador Sarek's death in the manner befitting a Vulcan wife."

"When's the funeral?" Kirk asked.

"The Ambassador's body will be returned to Vulcan where his ashes will be scattered at the family shrine."

"Oh." Kirk paused, clearly unsure if the subject should be continued. Finally, he said, "You were supposed to report to me after your watch last evening."

Spock's eyes shifted away. He glanced at his library-station, drawing comfort from the familiar machinery. "I . . . I was busy and did not get off duty until after the second shift. By that time it was too late to report to your quarters."

"I see," Kirk said, looking as though he saw either too much or not enough.

Spock inhaled deeply. "Captain, thank you for trying to help, but it is something I must do for myself. May I be excused?"

"Where are you going?"

"To request an interview with Dr. McCoy," he responded.

Kirk nodded, fear and trust clearly warring in his hazel eyes. "Yes, Spock, you're dismissed from duty. And if you need someone to talk to after,

I'll be here."

Spock nodded.

When Spock entered Sickbay a few minutes later, he found McCoy sitting behind his desk, a half-filled brandy snifter clasped lightly in his right hand as he stared at the lighted viewscreen in front of him.

"Dr. McCoy?"

"Uh?!" The human, obviously startled, jumped. "What do you want?" His voice lacked the customary warm drawl.

Spock stood silently, unsure of how to broach the subject of his visit in fact of the doctor's coldness.

"Has the Surgeon General's Office replied to your recommendations, Commander?" McCoy demanded.

"I have not submitted a report, Doctor. I . . ." Spock paused. Chagrined over his emotional behavior since Sarek's death, Spock avoided eye contact with the human. But his mother had been correct. It was unVulcan to seek revenge, and somehow restitution must be made to McCoy, even though Spock feared he could not salvage their friendship--strange that now, when the relationship was destroyed, he could use the word! "I would like a word with you." Standing at ramrod attention, he found himself wishing the interview already over.

McCoy narrowed his eyes at Spock's request, then gestured to a chair drawn up on the other side of his desk.

"Have a seat."

"That will not be necessary, Doctor. What I have to say will not take long."

McCoy's drawl became pronounced. "No reason to be uncomfortable while you say it."

"Comfort is. . ."

McCoy made a tscking sound of exasperation. "Forget it," he said.

Swallowing heavily, Spock said, "Doctor, I have come to ask thy forgiveness." His words were formal; his voice low and hesitant from the fear that his apology would be refused.

Speechless, McCoy stared at him in wide-eyed bewilderment.

Unable to meet his eyes any longer, Spock bowed his head, letting his gaze fall to the doctor's desk.

McCoy's words were gentle. "Spock, an apology's not necessary. You did what you thought was right."

"No, Doctor, an apology is necessary. I regret the reception I gave your report of the events leading up to Sarek's death. I know you did everything

in your power to help him. You and I both understood that his chances of survival were 48.6 to one, and yet we both agreed that the risk had to be taken despite your lack of expertise in the field of Vulcan medicine. You did nothing to cause Sarek's death."

Never looking up, Spock hid his hands behind his back lest their trembling betray him. "I have destroyed the trust which must exist between a doctor and his patient. You may, in the future, lack confidence in any decision you reach regarding my health, and this is the result of my--my ill-thought words." Spock took a deep breath, then continued. "I want you to know that despite what I may have said on many occasions, I have always had the deepest respect for your abilities and skills as a healer. . ." He faltered once more and his gaze shifted from the desk to the floor. His voice was barely audible as he added, "More than that--I have lost a friend. . . For that I am most deeply sorry."

"Spock. . ."

The Vulcan turned to leave the room. "Spock, dammit! Let me say something, you pointy-eared computer-- What I mean to say--Spock. . ."

"Yes, Doctor?" Spock pivoted to face McCoy. Could reconciliation be possible?

McCoy had risen from his seat. "Spock, I understand your action, believe me. I haven't lost my trust in you. Have you lost yours in me?"

"Negative."

"Then let's just forget the whole thing?"

"I would prefer to remember, Doctor McCoy, lest

I risk your friendship yet again."

McCoy grinned. "Well now, Spock, if that's the Vulcan Way, I guess I can grow accustomed to it."

Spock hesitated, wanting to say more, then turned to go. "If you will excuse me, I must return to my duties."

"I don't think I can declare you medically fit yet," McCoy said thoughtfully from behind him.

Spock turned back, drawn as much by the warmth in the once-more drawing voice as by the unanticipated words. "What--"

McCoy was smiling as he filled a second glass that he had produced as if from nowhere. "Sit down and join me in a drink, Spock. For medicinal purposes."

Tentatively, Spock replied to McCoy's teasing. "I do not put alcoholic elixirs into my bloodstream, Doctor," he said with stiff formality.

McCoy held the glass out. "Yeah, and maybe that's what's wrong with you. Here, take it. Like I said, it's what the doctor ordered."

The stiffness drained away and Spock fought the smile which tugged at the corners of his mouth. "You are a quack, Dr. McCoy," he said. Taking the glass, he saluted the human doctor, on whom so many human lives rested--and, in his thoughts, also saluted his mother, who had shown him his blindness.

McCoy grinned. "Not a quack, Spock, just a--"

"Simple country doctor," Spock finished for him. McCoy nodded and clinked Spock's glass with his own.*



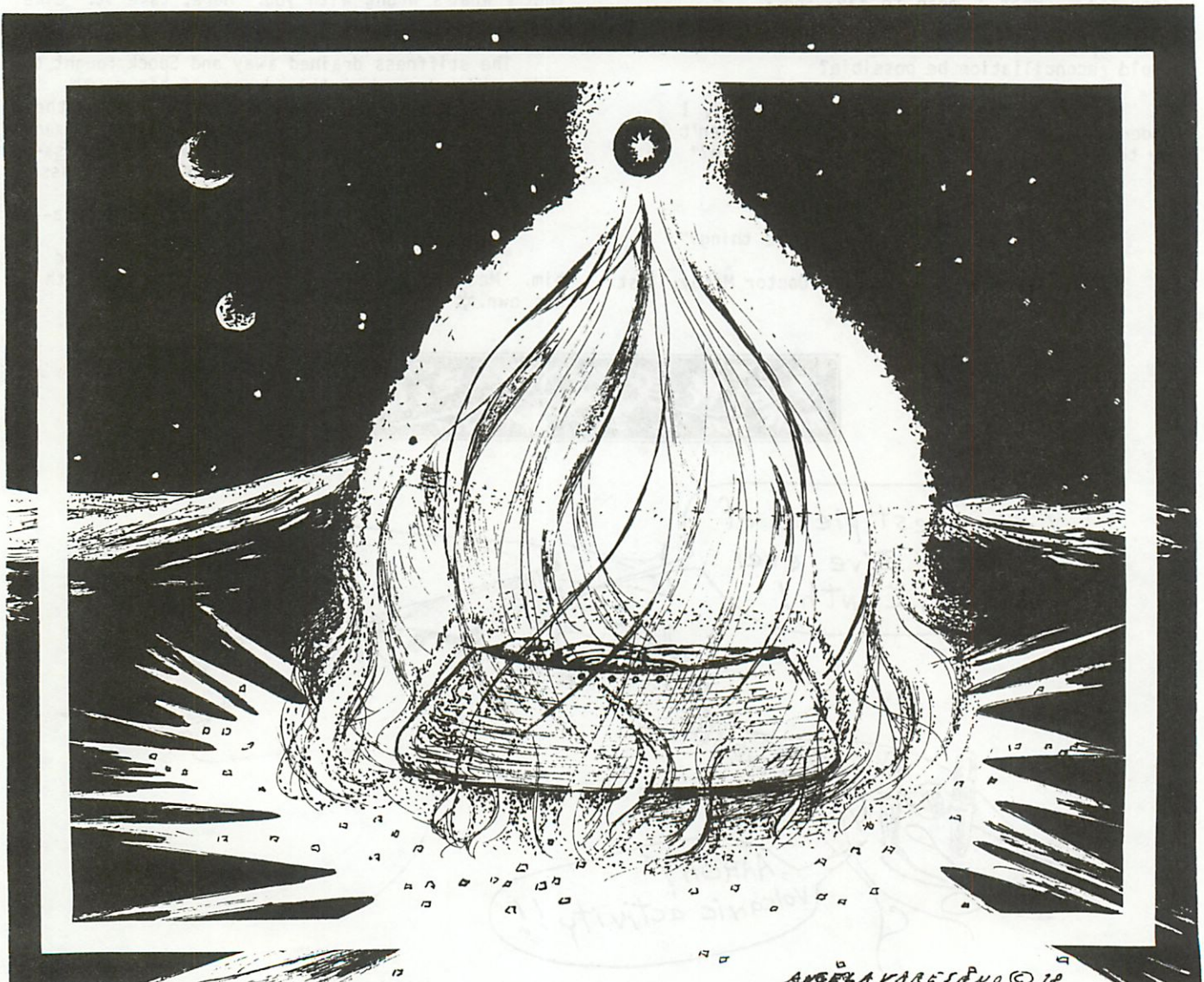
REPOSE ON A FAR PLANET

No curious mind of ours will mar
The shimmering coffin where you lie
Covered in starlit beauty
So strange beneath the sky.

Some would say that you are dead,
O ancient friend of mine,
Because your body sought its rest
And years have fled through time.

But I - I know your secret locked
Within your alien past:
This vessel dreams. Another guest
Shall find some life at last.

Angela-marie Varesano



Everything I Was

I once knew what it meant to care,
what it meant to be alive.
You were maybe seventeen
and I was twenty-five.
Then one day they told me that
my love for you was wrong;
And like a fool I went away
but my love kept burning strong.

Chorus: (You're) everything I was,
Everything I am,
Every time I think of you
I know why life began.
Everywhere I go,
Every time I sigh,
Every dawn and every night
I know our love can't die.

I ran around the world,
I covered land both far and wide.
I called it seeking treasure
but I was really just trying to hide.
Ten long years went by before
I had to face the day--
My wandering brought me to your door
and I couldn't turn away.

Chorus

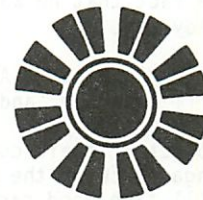
You told me that you hated me;
I said I was sorry twice.
I told you what I was looking for
and we settled on a price.
I didn't know how to tell you
what my heart was crying out.
You told me "go" and so I went,
but I knew I'd turn around.

Chorus

I came back just in the nick of time
and now you're in my arms.
I hold you close and wonder
why I ever wandered far.
I loved you then, I love you now,
and hang what came between.
We'll show them all that our love's as strong
as any ever seen.

Chorus

Music and lyrics by Fern Marder



Bound for Glory

Liz Sharpe

Thou'rt gone, the abyss of heaven
Hath swallowed up thy form; yet, on my heart
Deeply hath sunk the lesson thou hast given,
And shall not soon depart.

He who, from zone to zone,
Guides through the boundless sky thy certain flight,
In the long way that I must tread alone,
Will lead my steps aright.

--William Cullen Bryant, "A Waterfowl"

Han Solo glared earnestly at Lando Calrissian.

"I want you to take her," he insisted.

Lando held up his hands, palm outward, laughing.

"No, really!" Han continued, oblivious to the fact that he was arguing a case he'd already won.

"All right. All right!" Lando said. "I'll take her, and thanks. I know how much she means to you." He gestured to where the subject of their conversation stood on the hangar deck of the great rebel starship. "I'll take good care of her. She won't get a scratch. I promise you."

"Good," said Han. He looked dubious in spite of his words.

The two comrades locked arms for a moment.

"Good luck," Han said. "You're gonna need it."

"Good luck," Lando replied.

Han turned and started up the lowered ramp behind him. Midway, he paused and turned back.

"I've got your promise, now," he said querulously, and brandished an admonitory finger. "Not a scratch!"

"I promise!" Lando repeated. "Now get going, you old space pirate!"

Han turned and disappeared into the ship. Lando shook his head in amusement and went off to collect his diminutive copilot.

Han sat at the control panel in the cockpit, flipping switches and adjusting settings with almost absent-minded concentration. Chewbacca took the copilot's seat with a habitual grumble.

"No, I don't think they had Wookiees in mind when they designed this thing," Han replied, reaching up to key in a row of switches overhead. Other voices--it was strange to be spacing with a full crew, for once--filtered through the familiar sounds of preflight warmup. As he looked down to the main boards again, something caught Han Solo's eye.

He stopped what he was doing, and stared intently through the plasteel, caught up in a sudden, inexplicably powerful wave of emotion.

His lady stood there, proud and unapologetic among the sleek, deadly forms of the rebel X-wings. She looked very beautiful to him: after all this time she could still make his pulse race. All this time--it hadn't really been very long. What was a couple of years?

Wouldn't've missed it, long or short, Han thought. Chance had thrown them together in the beginning, but it was no accident that he'd hung on to her so tenaciously.

Won her off you fair and square, Lando, Han thought, catching a glimpse of his handsome and altogether too charming friend through the cockpit window. Then his gaze was drawn back to his lady.

Maybe she's not real impressive at first glance, he marveled. And she sure has her little ways. But how could anybody NOT love her, once they've known her?

Suddenly, she mattered to him very much, and he was afraid for her. He wanted to drop

everything and take her far, far away from the dangers looming ahead. She was both stronger and more fragile than she appeared. He didn't want to see her hurt, would give anything to see her safe...

Quit worrying! Han told himself. What's wrong with me today? So we're headed in different directions for a little while? That was your idea, back in the briefing room, Solo--your dumb hunch that it'd work out better if we split up this time. Get wise, hotshot. She doesn't have to have you along. She'll do just fine, like she did before you happened by.

Han gnawed on his lower lip, wishing the sudden uneasiness would go worry someone else. He recognized the sensation, and he didn't like it; he'd felt this way before. In the carbon-freeze chamber on Bespin, it had come over him: a sudden acute awareness that he was committed to a gamble with fate for the highest stakes there were. In a very, very dangerous game.

As before, there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it.

Wouldn't've done any different, if I'd had a choice, he thought vaguely. Do it all over again, any time. For Leia. For Luke. Chewie, Lando--whatever I have is on the line, whenever they need it. Maybe now.

The inner warning was stronger than it had ever been before.

Your number has to come up sometime, Solo, the Corellian mused remotely. Could be now. Could be; might be; may be; maybe this time...

"Hey," said someone familiar in his ear. "You awake?"

"Yeah," he replied, and was surprised to find his voice uncertain. He swallowed hard. "It's just--all of a sudden, I've got this feeling. Like I'm not going to see her again."

Beside him, Chewie grumbled something in response.

Han studied her a moment longer.

We've have some good times together, he thought. It hasn't exactly been real peaceful, but then, what would I do if things were calm and orderly all the time? Go crazy.

He contemplated her graceful curves approvingly.

We haven't always pulled together smoothly. Getting to know her was tricky. Had to put one hell of a lot of work into her. But it's been worth it.

He tried to imagine their future together, but his mind balked. He just couldn't visualize anything beyond the task at hand. The inability troubled him.

So what happens next? Han wondered moodily.

Once, his entire life had revolved around the Millennium Falcon; now Leia Organa had come along and won his heart in a different way. How to combine the two?

Leia knew where her path lay: with the New Republic. But while Han admired, and sometimes envied, her dedication and her sense of purpose, he just didn't share it. Sure, he'd finally given in and joined the Alliance officially. He figured he owed them plenty. But a lot of his 'fellow' rebels still made him want to laugh, or punch somebody in the nose, and that wasn't going to change. What the hell was he going to do with himself if the rebels actually won?

Face up to it, Solo, he told himself. It'll probably come down to either Leia or the Falcon; and how're you going to be able to live without either one of 'em?

Chewbacca growled again. It was time to be moving.

Got to shake this mood, Han thought. He straightened his shoulders defiantly. Let the future take care of itself. I've changed before; maybe it's time to change again.

Maybe he was already changing. The old Han Solo would never have let Lando take custody of his lady, even temporarily.

I must be as crazy as they say, Han reflected wryly. But I had to let her go sometime. It's not like it's forever.

But part of him kept insisting that this parting would be significant.

Wish I could be with her now.

He shook his head, annoyed. Usually he had better control of his own attitudes.

Worry about the long run when you're sure you'll have one, Solo. Right now you've got a mission to complete. And it's gonna be plenty dangerous without you glooming and dooming all over the place before you even get started. Think of the others: anxiety is catching. Get with it! Where's that old Solo fighting spirit?

"Okay, Chewie," he said, his voice regaining some of its customary crispness. "Take her up. Let's see what this hunk of junk can do."

Chewbacca's answering roar was lost in the swelling noise from the engines, as the Millennium Falcon bore them aloft.

* * * *

Leia saw Han through the cockpit and blew him a kiss, in case he was looking her way. Then she turned and marched up the ramp of the captured Imperial shuttle. Inside, Lando was concluding his preflight routine.

"Hey, Leia," he said, seeing her come in over her shoulder. "Han's on the comlink. Wants to talk to you."

She sat at the communications station and switched on the ship-to-ship.

"Hi there, hotshot," she said cheerfully. "What's up?"

"Leia," he returned her greeting. "Me, looks like."

"No fooling," she replied, as the Falcon lifted cautiously above the frantic bustle of the hangar deck.

Luke crowded into the tiny cabin and the hatch sealed behind him.

"All set," he reported.

"That Luke?" Han's voice crackled companionably.

"Hi, Han," Luke answered. "You ready?"

"Yeah, sure. Could've been on my way hours ago, if it hadn't been for you slow-pokes," Han replied. "Say, the techs did a fine job of fixing up the Falcon. She's in great shape."

"I'll pass the word along," Luke said, and grinned. He'd spent a certain amount of time in the battered freighter's crawlways himself, making sure the job got done right. "The maintenance crew'll be pleased."

"Thanks. Hey," Han began in a bantering tone. "Kid? When this is over, would you just do me one favor...?"

Luke knew what was coming next from experience. This was a little ritual they went through every time Han found he had let himself be wheedled into taking on yet another hopeless rebel mission.

"Don't tell me. I know. I know!" Luke anticipated his friend. "When we get back, I'll be sure to remind you never to volunteer again!"

"You won't have to, this time," Han declared. "This is the last mission I'm ever flying."

The words seemed to reverberate oddly. Luke felt the pang of a disturbance in the Force. The young Jedi didn't answer his friend immediately; instead, he turned his attention on the Millennium Falcon. Beside him, Leia stirred; Luke knew she'd caught a hint of the same turbulence, though she probably only recognized it as a 'bad feeling.' Tentatively, Luke probed the currents of the Force, seeking the future. He drew back in dismay.

Not Han! Not now! Not this time!

But the patterns were very strong. Now that he was attuned, Luke saw that the Falcon practically glowed with the tremendous Force potential building around her.

"Hey kid! Leia, you there?" Han's voice came over the comlink. "That was supposed to

be a joke! I didn't mean it like that. I'm just never going to volunteer again, after this is through. And now that they've made me a general, they're gonna have a tough time finding anybody with enough rank to order me to go anywhere."

"Right," Luke agreed dryly, controlling his voice, composing his features, and damning his talents.

Nothing about the future is certain until after it happens, Luke reminded himself. But the vision burned stark and unwavering in his mind.

He knew Han perceived it, too, in some way: the smuggler was more in tune with the Force than he would ever admit.

Well, if I told him he was right to feel edgy, he'd just scoff at my 'Jedi nonsense,' Luke thought, feeling ancient with unwanted knowledge. And he'd still go. He has to: he knows how much depends on him.

Luke steeled himself against the doomed brightness.

All right, Han: I'm with you. There's always hope, and when hope starts to fail, we can still fall back on bravado. Get out there and beat the odds one more time, old buddy. Please.

The sequence of thoughts went by in a flash.

"Anyway," Luke finished belatedly, "rank or no rank, nobody could ever make you do anything you hadn't already decided to do for yourself. You've always followed your own path, made your own decisions."

"Damn right," the smuggler seconded firmly.

"Han..." Leia began, suddenly apprehensive. Han and Luke sounded so solemn, for some reason. It was nothing she could put a finger on... Only Lando seemed immune to the undercurrents here. "Good luck," she continued, "and be careful."

"May the Force be with you," Luke said.

"If the Force knows what's good for it, it'll stay away from me," Han retorted. "And I don't have to be careful." The Corellian's cocksure laughter filled the Tydirium's cabin. "I'm good!"

The Millennium Falcon eased toward the stars.

"We'll be with you in our thoughts," Luke said.

"You put your mind on business, and you keep it there!" Han replied brusquely. "Al-ways. That's the only way you'll survive."

"All right. Yes sir, Your Generalship, sir!" Luke replied. "Blow her up real good,

Han!"

The consuming fireball hung before him in his mind's eye.

He willed the vision to begone.

"It's the only way to go," Han said.
"Hey, Leia. This one's for you. When you see that light in the sky, think of me."

"I will," Leia replied.

"But don't dwell on it, all right?"

"Why should I?" she returned. "It's just another exploding **Death Star**. Nothing to get excited about."

They all laughed a little nervously, even Lando.

"Any more last words before you get going, hotshot?" Leia asked, striving to keep the tone light. It was vital, going into a mission like this, to minimize distracting tensions.

"Yeah," said Han.

The **Falcon** hovered just beyond the hangar deck entrance, poised for the plunge into darkness. Han's voice came over the speakers, deep and a little uneven.

"I love you."

Leia pictured him outlined by stars, with that fleeting look of intensity on his face. She knew his words were meant for her--but not alone. They sounded so final. Fear touched her once again. Was Han Solo saying goodbye?

You're imagining things, she told herself staunchly.

"I know," she replied. She meant to match his self-possession, but in spite of herself, the words emerged husky and soft.

"Well, don't go all mushy on me, Princess," Han teased her with gentle affection.

They heard him take a deep breath.

"Okay. Here goes everything." The background noise from the **Falcon's** engines grew; Han's voice rose louder, challenging.

"Look out, **Death Star**. I'm on my way!"

With a whoop, he launched the **Millennium Falcon** into flight.

The echoes of his defiant yell took a long time to die.

* * * *

Luke watched the **Falcon** go, the brilliant corona of Force energy that enveloped her burning her silhouette into his mind.

Goodbye, Han Solo, he thought numbly. Words rose unbidden from his memory: 'The best star pilot in the galaxy; a cunning warrior; and a good friend.'

He knew.

Beside him, Leia stared fixedly at the point where the **Falcon** had disappeared.

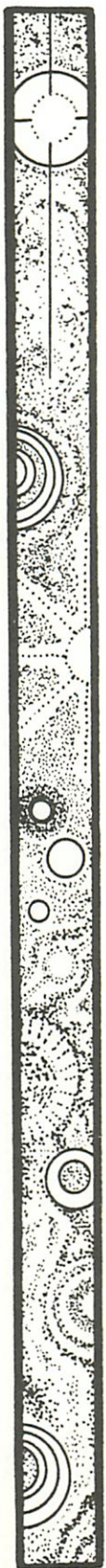
The brightness was in her eyes, too.

Luke leaned forward and took one of her hands gently in his.

"Leia," he said, willing the sincerity with which he spoke the truth to do its deceptive, comforting work. "The Force is with Han--whether he likes it or not."

She smiled at him doubtfully.

From a certain point of view, Luke added, silently. ✨



The Gods Grieve

Tranquilly Alderaan revolves in its orbit
as all about it stars glow white-hot
in the cold blackness of space.

The gods of the galaxies, riding flaming star chariots
on infinity's winds, view the peaceful scene with satisfaction.

Suddenly among them is a moon not of nature's design.
Curiously they regard this marvel of humankind technology
shrouded in an aura of gray malevolence.

Abruptly a great surge and disturbance occurs in the forces
which control the very core of life.

Soul-shattering explosions wrack the soundless void.

A beautiful, gracious planet is no more.

Griefstricken immortals pause in their patrol
of an endless domain.

Weeping silently for man's desecration of their realm
and his insatiable bloodthirst against his own kind.

Sarah Leibold



LOYALTIES

KAREN OSMAN

Lt. K4983/y-VI (Raen) stood stiffly in his unfamiliar parade armor with his dress helm clutched at his hip in both hands to prevent them from fidgeting. He smiled again, mechanically, hoping that the muscles of his jaw would hold out until the ceremony started and he could escape. The court lady who had backed him into a corner might have been attractive, but Raen couldn't tell. He realized that her face stencils and elaborate pile of green-dyed hair reminded him more than anything of the carved figures of native gods he had seen during his tour of duty on Girim. His glance slid over the lady to the dark figure of his commander who stood, boredom obvious in every movement of his powerful body, talking to the Imperial Minister of the Navy. Raen answered, for what seemed like the hundredth time tonight:

"No, my lady, I was not with Lord Vader during his escape. I was acting as his liaison with Governor Thort's staff at the time." *Spy*, his inner self emended silently. **And I was so sure there wouldn't be any of that in Lord Vader's Guard. Well--he has to protect himself like everybody else.**

"Yes, my lady, I did hear what happened. At the destruction of the **Death Star** Lord Vader's fighter was blown clear. It was captured by a rebel ship, but he managed to overcome the control room crew and bring it into an Imperial base at Pathnar." The lady seemed to accept this without question. **I'll bet that was quite a trick**, Raen's inner voice went on, as he tried to envision the tactics required. **I'd love to know how he did that. But I've seen him do a lot of things I couldn't explain--nobody could explain...**

"Oh, yes; I heard about that, I think." The lady frowned as if trying hard to remember. "It was all over the tri-D for days: all about Governor Tarkin trying to sell the new Imperial battle station plans to the rebels, and how Lord Vader found out and blew up the station all by himself so they couldn't get hold of it, and then found the rebel base, and--"

"WHAT?" Raen stared at the lady in total astonishment. That was the most amazing story he'd ever heard, like something out of a trashy adventure tape. What kind of nonsense had MinProp been putting out for civilian consumption?

"Lord Vader is such a hero, and," she simpered, "SO gallant. When I was presented, he said, 'My Lady Has' and kissed my hand; or he would have, except for--" she lowered her voice a little "--you know, the mask. But he bowed so elegantly, and," she sighed, "he's so mysterious and romantic. The ladies at court are all mad over him."

Raen hoped the revulsion he felt was not visible on his face. This conversation was becoming more bizarre by the moment. The idea of his dignified and aloof commander being pursued by this feather-brained socialite and her friends, like some popular tri-D star--

Speaking of tri-D-- Raen noticed a small crew carrying holovision recorders and tapers making their way noisily across the room. Raen recognized the leader as an anchorman on a local newsprogram. He hustled up to Vader, a bright smile pasted on his face, every hair in place. Silence fell as the room's occupants turned to watch, and Raen could hear the newsman's smoothly modulated professional tones from where he stood.

"Gentlebeings, we are here at the reception honoring that hero of the Imperial Navy, Lord Vader of the Sith. Lord Vader was the commander during the recent glorious victory in the Hoth system, which totally destroyed the traitorous rebel forces."

'Totally destroyed the rebel forces?' thought Raen. **Then those transports I saw must have been a mirage.**

"Lord Vader, would you be so kind as to answer a few questions for our viewers?" the bright young man pattered on. He stepped up and raised his recorder uncertainly in the general direction of Vader's grille.

For a full cycle of his respirator, Vader loomed silently over the newsman, impaling him on an icy metal look of disdain. The anchorman swallowed and rallied once again. "My Lord, you are about to receive the highest award the Empire can bestow on one of her loyal subjects. Could you describe your feelings for us at this moment, Sir?"

"I think not," said Vader. "If you will excuse me, I'm rather busy."

The newsman shut off his recorder. "Lord Vader, MinProp would appreciate your cooperation very much. Please, Sir--"

"No doubt," said Vader coldly. "However, I am not accountable to MinProp." He turned. "Admiral--" He swept off in a majestic swirl of dark cape, like a deepwater ship under full sail, and the Imperial minister he had been talking to trotted off in his wake.

The newsman lowered his recorder with a scowl. It was not difficult for Raan to guess what he was muttering under his breath. One of the cameramen caught sight of Raan and whispered in the anchorman's ear, pointing in his direction, and the group headed toward Raan. He felt a moment of panic and looked around for a way to escape, but Lady Has grabbed his elbow and said excitedly, "We're going to be on tri-D!"

Terrific. The anchorman went into his speech again. "Lieutenant? You're the Commander of Lord Vader's Guard, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Raan, "how did you know that?" The moment the words were out of his mouth, he felt like an idiot.

The newsman answered with a we're-all-buddies-here laugh, "Frankly, Lieutenant, you're the only trooper here. It wasn't too difficult to identify you."

Raan responded with a sickly smile.

"Your boss doesn't seem to want to talk. Maybe we can get something out of you for the audience."

"Why don't you talk to General Veers. I didn't see much of the battle. I'm just a pilot, really, and--"

"We got General Veers and the other commanders. What we need is somebody more--uh--somebody our viewers can identify with, to give us an eyewitness view." The reporter gave Raan a sympathetic half-smile. "See--I'm being honest with you. Why don't you give us a little cooperation?" He turned to his cameraman and said softly, "O.K.--tight shot, Fint; they'll know he's a cl--trooper, but we don't want to shove it in their faces."

The familiar dull resentment stirred in Raan. "All right."

The newsman nodded to the cameraman. "You were present during the final ground assault on Hoth, in command of Lord Vader's Guard, weren't you, Lieutenant?"

"That's right."

"You must be very proud to have taken part in a glorious victory which annihilated the enemy forces. Would you tell our viewers how you felt at that triumphant moment?"

"Well, it wasn't quite like that. We destroyed their base and a lot of their troops and materiel, but most of their top brass got away. It was pretty much of a stand-off, actually."

With a sigh, the newsman turned off his recorder again. "Listen, Lieutenant, what do you think this whole damn ceremony is about, anyway? The word from MinProp is that they want some death-or-glory stuff for public consumption, to make the government look good. Give me a break, will you?"

Raan found himself disliking the newsman more with every passing minute. He had wondered why they had all been ordered to attend this ceremony and why the Imperium was stressing this minor victory on Hoth. A propaganda campaign. No wonder Lord Vader had refused to speak to the media. To make the deaths of his men a sideshow for the sixth-hour newstapes--Raan felt sick.

"I'd rather not talk about it," he said.

The reporter swore. "All right. But you wait until you need us!" He rounded up his crew and walked off. The last thing Raan noticed was the crew approaching a confused-looking officer from Veers' walker.

Raan's last words had apparently distracted Lady Has from her disappointment at missing out on a tri-D appearance. "You don't want to talk about it? Oh, you poor man! It must have been terrible. You know, Lieutenant, all of us here at Court admire you troopers so much. You're so heroic, and. . ." One finger reached out and traced a kittenishly flirtatious line down Raan's armored forearm as the lady's eyes traveled down him. ". . .Fit. . ."

Raan shied backward and ran into the wall behind him. Lady Has swayed toward him. "You know, I've never met a regular trooper before. Only Lord Vader--" She coughed and stopped, dimly aware, perhaps, of an impending faux pas, as Raan's relentless inner voice finished for her: **--Only Lord Vader has clones for his personal Guard. Only Lord Vader sees us as human beings.** He clenched his teeth on his rising irritation and shifted his helm to the other hip to move his arm as far away from the lady as possible.

She chattered on, oblivious. "But surely you don't spend all your time fighting? After all, I've heard--" A faintly predatory look spread over her face, as she made another grab for his arm. "I'm sure you could teach me something new. . ."

Cosmos, another one. Raan had discovered that the court ladies all seemed to think sex with a clone was a new and exciting perversion. He eluded her by a hairsbreadth. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean, my lady."

"You don't?" she said archly.

"No, my lady." Raan's face was totally expressionless.

The lady sighed disgustedly and backed away. "No, you probably don't, you moronic clone. By the Maker, it's true: droids do have more brains. And probably better equipment," she finished spitefully over her shoulder as she walked away.

Raan's fingers tightened convulsively on his helm and he restrained a childish urge to throw it at the retreating figure. He looked at the wall

chrono. It's almost time. I might as well bring the Guard up for the ceremony.

He turned toward the door and almost ran into a young woman who was standing behind him. She was dressed in the same fashionable garb as the other female guests: a high-waisted, low-cut court gown that flickered from opaque to translucent as she moved. But her face was bare of stencils, and the hair piled on her head was a soft red-brown. She was pretty, too, Raan noticed; but he was in no mood for further feminine conversation.

"Your pardon, my lady--"

"Please--" She held out both hands helplessly to him. "Don't pay any attention to her. She thinks nobody can have any feelings if they're not--" She stopped.

"A 'real person'?" Raan finished savagely.

"Oh, no; I didn't mean that. It's just--what do you call us?"

A spirit of mischief stirred in Raan and the anger drained out of him. "We call non-clones a lot of things, my lady."

For a moment the girl looked as if she wanted to smile, but wasn't quite sure whether the joke was private or not. "Anyway," she continued, "Please don't judge all of us by Lady Has. She's managed to offend everyone at court at least once--I think it's a record--and the only reason she's still here is that her son is married to one of his Imperial Majesty's relatives. The ladies-in-waiting have been betting on who is going to get angry enough to hit her first." She looked thoughtful. "My money is on his Grace of Eckenroth. He has a low tolerance level. Of course, he's never been known to be unchivalrous toward a lady, but in this case, that restriction may not apply. . ."

"May I be so bold as to inquire your name, my lady?" Raan responded to the spark of conspiratorial humor in her expression.

"Oh--my name's Yoris; Yoris Maclarone. My father's Senator Maclarone--or at least he used to be."

Raan felt as if he had just swallowed a large lump of cold firstmeal gruel. He was standing here, actually having a conversation with the daughter of one of the oldest pre-Imperial noble families. His guard went up again, and he eyed her suspiciously. "Why should you be interested in what happens to me? I'm nobody important."

"You're a human being!" Yoris burst out. "And see what they've done to you? They've even convinced you that--" She stopped abruptly. Several heads had turned in their direction, apparently attracted by her tone. She smiled brightly. ". . . Tell me, Lieutenant, is this your first trip to the capitol? We so seldom see Lord Vader here at Court."

Raan, too, had noticed. Without missing a beat, he replied, "No, my lady; I don't think Lord Vader is much interested in life at Court, if you will pardon me. He's always in a hurry to get back to the fighting. If he hadn't been commanded to

attend the ceremony, I doubt that any of us would ever have seen the capitol." Here at last was a safe topic. Ignoring the glazed look of polite boredom which crept over Yoris' face, Raan launched into an enthusiastic account of his commander's heroic exploits. At last he could be completely honest. Raan's admiration for Darth Vader was genuine and close to fanatical.

A mellow chime sounded and a mechanical voice intoned, "The ceremony will begin in twenty minutes. His Imperial Majesty commands that you take your places at once." Raan started guiltily. Before he could move, Yoris unsnapped the personacom from the side of her evening bag and quickly punched in a series of digits, then pushed it into his hand. "Here. You can find me at this address--I'm at the University. Use a public cab."

"But--"

"It'll have to be there. With my father's position so uncertain, I can't risk anywhere else. But--" She reached out and took his hand for a brief moment and gave him a pleading look. "Please come. Please." The chime sounded again, and Yoris quickly let go of his hand. "Now go--you'll be late."

Raan hesitated, confused, and Yoris gave him a little shove. "Go! Hurry!"

Raan turned and almost ran for the door, pushing the personacom into his belt pouch and securing his helm as he went. Yoris stood looking after him, and her face was as confused as the whirling thoughts in Raan's mind.

A few quick orders moved the Dark Lord's honor guard into position at the far end of the Emperor's vast audience hall. Brightly dressed courtiers crowded the floor along the wood-paneled walls. High above, the huge formal banners of a hundred subject worlds hung from the vast roofbeams, their devices half-obsured in the gloom, a dim glitter of bright embroidery and stiff gold thread. At the other end of the hall, three wide stone steps led up to a dais and the Emperor's vast carved throne. There his Imperial Majesty waited, a hooded figure radiating cold force, cloaked in dark sorcerer's power and a sense of menace.

Vader's Guard advanced toward the throne. First came two troopers, one bearing the black banner of the Sith Worlds with its silver fret, and one a gonfanon with the Dark Lord's arms as heir of his House: sable, a luthra-hawk stooping, argent. His Guard followed in a hollow square of shining white which contrasted dramatically with the towering black figure in the center. Perfectly in step, they paced off the length of the hall. When they reached the foot of the dais steps, Raan barked a single command. The banner-bearers dipped their flags in salute, stepped to the side and then back, as the white ranks in front wheeled, turned, countermarched to the rear, and closed again without breaking step into two precisely dressed lines behind the Dark Lord. As the Emperor rose, Vader bowed his knee in a deep reverence. Then, flanked a pace to the rear by arms which had been proud and ancient when the Republic itself was new, the Lord of the Sith

stepped forward to receive the Imperial award.

* * * *

The next morning, when his Guard had formally escorted Lord Vader to his guest quarters and been dismissed, Raan shepherded his men to the visitors' barracks in the sprawling military complex that acted as headquarters, barracks, officers' quarters, and dispatching center for the capitol. Raan called the troopers together for final instructions.

"All right, men: Lord Vader will be here for at least a tenday, maybe two. All of you except those assigned on rotation as bodyguard (check the schedule) will be on liberty except during the ceremonial functions. There's a list of those posted into the 'puter; be sure to check it. Don't be late for any of them. And if you go out of barracks, I want your armor to shine--and I don't mean a quick wipe-down, I mean spit-and-polish. Remember that you're Lord Vader's Guardsmen!"

Raan watched with satisfaction the half-unconscious intake of breath and straightening of shoulders that ran through his men at these words, the preening gesture of an outfit proud of its rep and ready to defend it against all comers. There was no morale problem with his troops, not with a commander like the Dark Lord and their recent victories.

"If you're going to get drunk or smoked up, or screw around, do it in one of the clone places--not where the Others can see you," Raan continued. Then he grinned. "Otherwise, it's green board. Enjoy the big city; it may be a long time before you get back again." The troopers laughed, well aware of their commander's distaste for desk soldiering.

"Dismissed." The men scattered in small, cheerful groups, and Raan found himself alone. He checked the 'puter readout out again: no, nothing until the formation two days from now. The first thing I'm going to do, he thought, is get out of this damned dress armor. It was new issue, and everywhere it didn't pinch, it itched. He picked up his kit and headed for the transients' BOQ, wondering if any of the year-brothers from his decanting run would also be on assignment at headquarters during his stay. The featureless corridor walls in their familiar official shade of grey reminded him of the clonebarrack of his childhood and the passageways of every ship he had served on. Here he was content, complete, and secure. By the time he reached the desk at the BOQ section, he was whistling softly to himself.

He was brought up short by the clerk in a civilian service uniform behind the desk. Then it occurred to him that downport on a whole planet full of a civilians, a human clerk would be a more efficient use of resources than a rating or a droid. More efficient, but-- Raan's eyes narrowed slightly with instinctive resentment as the man went through the process of crossmatching his identifying voice-print.

"Ah, yes; the commander of Lord Vader's Guard." They faced each other with muted mutual hostility. "We're kinda crowded here, Lieutenant; there's been a lot of traffic lately," the clerk continued. His expression said as plainly as words: you may have officer's rank, but you're still nothing but a clone.

"Yeah, I heard," Raan said.

The clerk gave him a poisonous look. "We only have one room open, and I'm afraid it's in the non-Coms' barracks, Sir. You'll have to share a double."

"Who is it?"

"His number's R1538. VIII-series. Sergeant."

Raan thought for a moment. "Sounds familiar, but I can't place him."

"It's either bunk with him or set up in the hall, Sir," the clerk said. "Take your choice."

Raan was bone-tired and his dress armor was now itching furiously in a variety of annoying places. The thought of arguing with this bureaucrat was humiliating, and the prospect of appealing to his commander for an override was even worse. He decided it wasn't worth the fight; he'd spent enough time in troopers' quarters. "Fine with me. I'll take it."

The clerk keyed the room to Raan's pattern and turned back to talk to his board. Raan walked down to the NCO section and palmed his lock. The door slid open on a tiny grey cubicle down the hall. It was molded of a single piece of pre-fab plassteel, and with the room controls off, nothing broke the sweep of wall except a change of texture where the floor began and the lines of furniture folded up into the wall. He identified two bunks, a tabledesk and chairs, storage, a 'com, a door that led to this room's half of a shared 'fresher unit, a monitor. There were signs of occupation: a kitbag against one wall and a shell hung neatly in the armor storage unit. But there was no clue to his roommate's identity. Spacers travel light and there was not much room for personal belongings on board a warship.

With a sigh of content, Raan got out of his dress armor, hung it up, 'freshe'd, and put on body-suit fatigues. Then he unpacked his well-worn battle armor and checked it over carefully. He was concerned about one osmotic component in the atmospheric filtration system which seemed to be cutting in a little slowly. A few minutes' tinkering satisfied him that it was back in synch with his breathing cycle. He set the helm on the top shelf above the rest of the shell and dialed the storage unit shut.

There was nothing more to occupy him in his room and he had most of the day yet to fill. With a shrug, Raan stepped out again into the corridor and paused to consider his options. He was restless. None of the activities which had occupied him on former leaves seemed worth the effort now that he had no clone-brothers to share them. It was too early to get drunk, and anyway, he decided he didn't really want to. I'm an officer now, he thought with some relief; I don't have to prove anything. He considered visiting one of the houses along the Strip, but the idea was vaguely depressing. Maybe later. He decided to settle for caf and headed for the wardroom.

Raan drew a cup of the hot drink from the dispenser and drifted across the room to join a group of fatigue-clad junior officers in an animated

technical discussion on the merits of a new model of laserrifle now being field-tested. The argument continued until one of them put down his mug and said firmly, "I don't care if the M-48 does have more range and firepower. Accuracy's more important. Half the time with the charming glitches that little bitch comes up with, you'd score better throwing rocks at the rebels. I'll take the P-12." He turned to Raan. "You're pretty good at wargaming. Join me for a couple of campaigns?"

Raan tried to remember where he had seen the other lieutenant before, and finally recalled him as a regular spectator at the trooper wargaming tournaments on board the old *Anadarko*, the fleet's training ship. A valiant mental effort recovered the man's name: Sheret? Yes, that was it. He had never gamed with the man before; officer cadets might attend trooper tournaments, but they did not participate in them. Raan felt a pleased surprise that the young officer wanted to campaign with him.

The two adjourned to the wargaming room and took seats at the outlet terminals overlooking a six-foot square of simulated terrain. The game 'puter assigned them equivalent armies and threw in a series of random factors to make the imitation more interesting. Under the generalship of the players, hundreds of little holographic figures marched over the board. Tiny aliens and troopers maneuvered miniature TIEs and ships, charged each other, fired minuscule blaster rifles, and bled and died in realistic fashion as Raan's fingers moved over the bank of controls.

Ordinarily, the mock warfare would have fascinated Raan. His opponent turned out to be a skillful and imaginative player, and for the first few campaigns Raan found himself absorbed in countering Sheret's unorthodox tactics. Gradually, he found his attention wandering, and the restlessness he had felt earlier returned. He tried to force his mind back to the game, but at last, after his advance guard had been decoyed into an ambush that should have been obvious to a first-year cadet, Sheret clicked off his terminal and raised quizzical eyebrows at Raan. "You've got a wire crossed somewhere, Raan. You're aren't tracking today. Want to concede?"

"Yeah, I guess," Raan muttered.

Sheret checked the chrono. "It's just about time for the Strip to start getting lively. I'm going to hit a couple of bars and the Maalie's. I heard she's got a new girl who's good at tris--want to join me?"

"I don't think so, thanks," Raan answered.

"What's the matter? Not feeling good?"

Raan seized on this excuse to avoid trying to define the disquiet he felt. "Yeah. Guess I've still got a bit of hyperlag. I'm going to go sleep for a while, and maybe it'll straighten itself out. I'll check out the Strip later."

"Take care of yourself, then," Sheret said. He wandered away.

A nagging sense of duty prompted Raan to look in on his men before heading back to his quarters. As usual, the enlisted men's rec area was thick with

euphoric fog and heavy with smells from drinks, smokes, and less common recreational drugs from half the galaxy's inhabited worlds. Some of the Guard had already headed for the Strip, but most of them were taking the opportunity to swap stories and souvenirs with men from other units. His Guardsmen clustered around Raan with friendly greetings, offering to buy him the ritual drink, but he refused, smiling, and left as soon as he was sure everything was in order and the bodyguard rotation was going smoothly. Although he had complete confidence in his sergeant, Raan knew that his men appreciated his concern. He also knew that they felt inhibited by an officer, and he didn't want to put a crimp in their liberty time.

Once again, Raan felt his quiet satisfaction in his commander's unique policy of promoting clone officers. In so many units, the officers understood nothing of their troopers' background and hardly regarded them as human. At least, thought Raan, Lord Vader's officers can remember what it was like to be a regular trooper. He thought of the clerk who had assigned him quarters, and his mouth twisted sourly. The civil service might not be willing to accept clone officers, but the military knew better than to show disrespect to one of Lord Vader's officers, no matter what they might think privately.

The old antagonism stirred in him. Civilians. Non-clones and civilians. There were alien, unknown, probably dangerous. He had gone directly from the clone barracks of childhood to training aboard the *Anadarko*. His life had been planned for him before he was decanted, and it included nothing as disorderly and uncertain as civilians. They were a mystery, and as Raan's mind drifted back to the concept of 'civilian' and then to the pretty young girl he had met at the award ceremony, he felt the tug of curiosity, the half-ashamed, disturbing curiosity of a forbidden subject, a subject he was not supposed to wonder about. What might a civilian--a civilian girl--be like?

She had asked him to come see her. What could that mean? He had no idea what a girl could want, could mean, except for the woman at the clone Houses on the Strip, the Strip here and on a hundred other downports across the galaxy where his ships had touched port. They were the only women he had ever known, and they were clones, too; his own people, though alien in their own way as any non-humanoid. When he had gone there with his fellow troopers, he had picked out anyone who looked as if she wouldn't laugh at him. He didn't have to talk to them; they knew what he wanted. But they never talked to him either. He understood nothing of them.

How much less he understood of this strange non-clone girl, this woman, who had asked him to come to her. Why did she want him? Was he, perhaps, a person to her, rather than a function? No, surely not, and yet... She had the whole mysterious world of civilians to choose from; what could a clone, a trooper, mean to her? A vagrant thought, uncertain, embarrassing, sensual and exciting: what would it be like to have a woman who wanted him? A woman, and a non-clone...

While this had been passing through his mind, Raan had been walking toward his quarters, and with a start, he looked up to see that he had almost

walked right past his room. He palmed the lock and stepped in. His anonymous roommate, owner of the kitbag and armor, was standing on one foot with his back to the door, pulling on a fatigue suit. He was a typical VIII-clone, several inches taller than Raan and much stockier. Heavy muscles rippled across his back as he pulled on the pantsleg, and his freshly washed black hair curled damply against the nape of his thick neck. His broad, good-natured face broke into a wide grin as he turned around. **No wonder his number sounded familiar**, Raan thought, **it's--**

"Khet! I didn't know you were here. I thought your troop was still stationed on the **Invincible**."

"Nope. Been transferred to the **Avenger**. Hey-- what are you doing down here in NCO territory? I heard you'd gone up in the world." He looked concerned. "It's not trouble, is it? You're still with the Droid, ain't you?"

"I'm still with Lord Vader. It's a long story," Raan said hurriedly. He glanced at the monitor. "Khet, he doesn't like--"

Khet laughed. "Relax. Vader ain't going to burn a humble sergeant, especially--" he faked polishing his fingers on his sleeve "--especially one who taught his Guard commander said sergeant's best hand-to-hand moves on his first tour out. He's got more important people to get pissed at, like captains and admirals. Speaking of which," his eyes sparkled wickedly, "I heard Tarkin bought it when the new battle station blew. (I thought you'd gone with it, too, little brother. Sure was glad to hear otherwise.) He was the commanding officer on Caradinae when--when it happened. Man, it's almost worth losing one to the rebels to get rid of that little--" The glum look on Raan's face evidently penetrated his burble. "Hey--what's the matter? You must a' been hanging around those dumb IIIs on the gun crew again. You used to have a sense of humor."

"Sorry, Khet."

"So, what is it? You lonely up there in officer territory?"

"No, it's not that." Raan thought of Sheret. "The officers are pretty decent."

"Well?"

"Well--" Raan gave an indefinite shrug in the direction of the monitor.

"Oh." Khet turned his broad back to the spyeye, walked in front of Raan and made shooing motions toward him and the door. "Let's go down to the Strip and talk about it." **Wait**, he mouthed.

The two went out. Khet made a 'wait here' gesture with one hand, bellied down, and started to slide across the floor under the level visible to the monitor. The door slid shut. Five minutes later, the door opened again and Khet said, "Come on in. It's green."

"What did you do?"

"Just patched in my continuous loop of an empty room. Comes in handy sometimes." He splayed his

hands. "They don't call me 'nimble fingers' for nothing, y'know."

Raan started to laugh helplessly. He pushed the control for one of the chairs and half-fell into it. Grinning, Khet took the other chair. "Now, little brother," he said, "what's the problem?"

Hesitantly, Raan began to tell him about the girl he had met at the ceremony. Encouraged by Khet's sympathetic nods, he found himself pouring out his earnest, half-formed longings. Khet's nods gradually slowed, and a look of unease tending toward alarm spread across his face. Raan dribbled to an embarrassed, apologetic halt.

"I don't like it," Khet said. "I don't like it at all. The last thing you need is to get involved with one of the damned Others--and a civilian, too. Come on down to the Strip with me and I'll find you a girl."

"But this girl isn't like that."

"They're all like that, Raan," the sergeant said grimly. "The only difference is what they cost. An' I don't think you're going to be able to afford this one."

"But Khet--"

"Listen, buddy, you're one of ten--twelve clone officers in the whole Service. You're in with maybe the most powerful commander in the Fleet. Don't blow it." He turned his head away and said roughly, "Half the Numbers in the Fleet'd give their right arm to be where you are."

Raan shifted in his chair. "I didn't have anything to do with it, Khet. You know that Lord Vader just likes VI-series."

Bitterly: "Yeah, I know."

"Besides, it's not like I'm going to get involved with her permanently. Lord Vader's only going to be here a tenday or so. What can happen?"

"You'd be surprised, little brother. You'd be surprised."

Raan simply sat, stubbornly silent.

"Don't sit there staring at me like a bantha cow with a bellyache," Khet snarled. Then he sighed. "All right. You really want this girl?"

Raan nodded, nervously studying the toes of his indoor half-boots.

"So what are you going to do about it?"

". . . I thought I'd go down there; say I want to return her 'com, and. . ."

"In armor?" Khet looked disgusted. "Here, let me see that address. Hmm; that's down by the University. You'd stick out like a tauntaun in the Jundland. It isn't safe for anything less than a squad, in armor, down there. One of my patrols was jumped by a bunch of Silver Front goons last tenday. Lost two of my men, and three of the others are still in MedSec." He cursed imaginatively and with feeling. "Those Silver Front types are worse than

the rebels--they'll kill anything that moves in an Imperial uniform, just for the fun of it. Turns them on or something, the perverted bastards. 'Students,' hah!" He looked sharply at Raan. "Are you sure the girl's not in with them or the rebels?"

"The rebels? Oh, no; her father's in the government and she's real worried about him. She's a student, I think. She's all right. Besides, why would a rebel want to make it with a trooper?"

"Don't ask me. They're all crazy."

A thought occurred to Raan, intruding on his own concerns. Puzzled, he asked, "What the hell were you doing with a patrol down near the University? I thought you were assigned to **Avenger**."

"I'm posted, but I haven't reported yet--I've still got another tenday between tours. Officially unattached. Things have been pretty hot around here lately," he continued absently. "Need every warm body with a rifle they've got a rotate patrols." He chewed on a knuckle and eyed Raan consideringly. "If you're actually going through with this dumb idea, you'll need some civvies."

"Civvies?" Raan was thinking that it was just like Khet to volunteer for an extra chance to get shot at and then pass it off casually with an off-hand remark. And how many times had Khet told him: **the basic rule for survival in this system is 'Never volunteer.'** The fraud.

"Civvies. To wear, idiot. I supposed, being the straight-arrow type you are, all you've got is regulation issue, right?"

"That's it."

"I think I know where I can scrounge up some clothes to fit a VI. Wait here. I'll be back in a little while." Khet paused at the door. "You're sure you want to do this?"

Raan faced him squarely and took a breath. "I'm sure." I think.

Khet was back in about an hour, carrying some nondescript civilian clothing: a beige tunic, brown pants, brown vest, and a pair of short boots. They fit surprisingly well. When Raan had dressed, Khet handed him a small civilian-type hand blaster. "There's a holster inside the vest. You don't want to go out of barracks without some kind of weapon." He grimaced. "It's kinda pitiful, but it's better than nothing."

"Thanks, Khet." Raan paused as if he were going to say something more, then decided against it.

"Go take 'em off again," Khet said. "You don't want anybody to catch you with that stuff on in barracks, do you?"

Raan retrieved his fatigues from the floor and started to strip again. Khet frowned at his bare back. "I'm not letting him go out there on his own," he muttered. "I don't trust any of 'em."

"Raan."

Raan looked up from pressuring shut the opening

on his fatigues.

"If you run into anything--"

Raan smiled. "I'll be all right."

"Good luck, little brother," Khet said as the door slid shut behind Raan, and added somberly, his face uncharacteristically serious, "I think you're going to need it before this is over."

* * * *

Yoris was sitting on the edge of a rumpled bed talking to a lanky young man who looked as if he had never smiled in his life. "You should have seen it, Pallon. The expression on his face when Lady Has backed him into a corner was absolutely priceless! I couldn't resist going over to talk to him--and then I got this wonderful idea."

Pallon ran a hand through his unruly brown hair. "It's dangerous, Yoris. A trooper that close to Vader is nothing to fool around with."

"Aren't you the one who's always telling me we have to show the Alliance we mean business, that we can handle things by ourselves, that the Silver Front is a serious part of the Movement? If we can pull this off, it'll prove it." Yoris' mouth curved up in a teasing half-smile. "Besides, he's kind of cute. This could be sort of fun."

He rose to the bait. "He's a clone and a trooper--an enemy of the people. I don't like to think of him. . .touching you."

"Why, Pallon, you're jealous."

"I am not jealous. A revolutionary has no time for such useless private emotions."

"Oh, don't be so stuffy. It was only a joke."

"This is serious, Yoris. There's no room for levity. We have to focus all our energy on the goal." He began to pace back and forth, hands clasped behind his back. "The Silver Front is the true movement, the only group that really understands the forces of history, the only one that truly speaks for the people. The Alliance--pah! Halfway measures, reactionary nonsense about 're-storing the Old Republic. . .' The Organas are no better than the Vaders. Blood-sucking aristocratic parasites, all of them! We have to work with the Alliance for now, but when we've gotten rid of the Emperor, then you'll see a real revolution, a meaningful revolution. True justice, for all the people, and--"

"Pallon, I am not in a cell meeting! You don't have to give me a speech."

He stopped pacing, deflated, and turned to look at her. "Just what makes you think this is going to work, anyway?"

Yoris got up, walked to the window and stood looking out over the city. The university was on the edge of the Old Quarter, and from where she was standing, she could see over the rooftops of the student housing to its twisting streets and narrow buildings. Deep in the Old Quarter she noted in passing the burned open space among the crowded

houses that had been Ruwenjorin, last dojo of the Jedi order, before the Purge. Vader's old school.

"I don't know for sure it'll work," she said at last, serious now. "But this trooper is closer to Vader than anybody except his personal droid. That bodyguard goes everywhere and sees everything he does. Short of getting a spy into the Guard itself, we can find out more about how he thinks, what he does, how we can get to him, from this trooper than from anyone we've ever had a chance at. And you know there's no way we can disguise one of our people as a clone well enough to pass. We can't miss this opportunity."

"If we could take out Vader, it would be a major blow to the Empire. The Alliance has been trying to do it for years," Pallon reluctantly agreed. "All right. But why do you have to get friendly with this trooper? Let's grab him and mind-probe him. That'll tell us everything he knows, and you won't have to get involved. I don't want--" He swallowed the rest of the sentence.

Yoris understood the mute appeal in his face, and reached up to touch his cheek gently. "No, Pallon," she said. "You haven't taken Professor Natero's course yet, have you? The subconscious can be blocked by resistance to the mind-probe; without his cooperation, it will only tell us what he knows consciously. But this guy's only a trooper. Most of what we need to get to Vader, he doesn't know consciously. It's all observation, things he's seen but not thought about. We have to bring up those little bits of information to the surface of his mind and integrate them into a pattern of behavior for Vader."

"You think you can get a trooper under fealty-oath to betray his commander? I didn't think they could do that."

"As far as I know, they can't. The books say that loyalty is basic to their primary post-decanting conditioning." She made a face. "What a horrible system! Treating human beings like droids, making them into some kind of machines..."

"That's part of what we're trying to change, Yoris."

"I know, I know." She shrugged. "Anyway, once we get him cooperative, we'll tell him we're looking for something else in his memories. I'll think of something."

"This still sounds awfully complicated. I hope it turns out the way you're planning."

"So do I. Believe me." She gave him a kiss. "And I promise not to get any friendlier with him than I absolutely have to."

Pallon took her into his arms, and the rest of their conversation had nothing whatever to do with politics.

* * * *

Raan caught a robocab outside the headquarters complex and punched in the address on Yoris' com. He sat down gingerly in the passenger seat, acutely aware of his lack of armor. He could feel a breeze

on his shins, like something small and nasty nibbling on them, from the ventilation opening near the cab's floor. The vulnerable area between his shoulderblades itched, and the civilian blaster felt very inadequate in its hidden holster.

The cab floated past classroom buildings and the park-like central campus, and came to the fringe of the university area, crowded with rundown off-campus housing, esoteric bookstores, strange little shops, and hole-in-the-wall restaurants apparently specializing in inedible ethnic or health foods of various kinds. It came to a stop in front of an old private house with the lower story converted into a coffeehouse. The late afternoon sunshine turned its chipped brown walls into soft earthcolor and highlighted the cracked patterned tiles around the front window. Several small tables listed drunkenly on the uneven cobblestones of the patio, and a vine-covered fretwork spanning the area threw dappled, moving shadows over the few people sitting there. From what Raan could tell of them, they were mainly young, with the unkempt and slightly preoccupied look of students, but he was not familiar enough with civilians to be sure. He ran the gauntlet of stares into the building, and looked around for Yoris. The interior was dark with old wood and ingrained grime, but there was a cheerful air about the place, with bright holopictures, some of them clearly amateur or experimental in nature and adorned with unobtrusive pricetags, all over the walls, and old-fashioned cloth covers on the little tables. A small blaze crackled in the fireplace built into one wall, and appetizing smells drifted through the half-doors off the kitchen. A few more customers sat here and there among hanging plants Raan recognized as native to several different worlds. He went up to the young man behind the counter.

"Is there a Yoris Maclarone here?"

The young man looked him over and called out, "Mekla!"

"Yes, Pallon?" An older man, tall and grey-haired, came out of the kitchen, wiping his hands on a towel. In spite of the apron he wore, he had an air of calm dignity. He smiled at Raan. "Welcome. I don't think I've seen you here before. Are you new at the University?"

"I'm not a student," Raan said, and conditioned reflex made him add, "Sir. I met Miss Maclarone at... at a party, and she left her com behind. I'm here to return it."

"Sir, eh," said Mekla. "Hear that, Pallon? The young man is definitely not a student. What's your name, son? I'll see if Yoris is upstairs."

Raan was caught unprepared. Raan was his clonename, and he certainly couldn't give his number here. "Uh...uh...Radin," he stammered.

The young man gave him a hostile stare which puzzled Raan, but Mekla smiled again. "Well, Radin, we'll find out for you if she's in. Go and see, would you, Pallon?"

Pallon turned silently and went up the stairs. "So you're not a student," Mekla continued conversationally. "What do you do, then?"

But Raan's meager invention had failed. "I'm just visiting the city. I'm sort of on vacation."

"If there's anything we can do for you while you're here, let us know. That's what we're here for at The Beacon," said Mekla. He shook his head. "So many of these kids don't have anybody. We try to help a little."

"That's quite all right, Sir." Raan was somewhat alarmed. All he needed was some nosy civilian busybody prying into his presence here. "I'm fine. I just want to see Miss Maclarone."

"Here she is," said Mekla. There was the sound of feet hurrying down the stairs and Yoris bounced in, beaming. "I'm so glad you did come! This is the man I told you about, that I met at the Palace." She gave Pallon a meaningful look over his shoulder.

"Yes, I thought he was," Pallon said sourly.

"Oh, Pallon!" There was an edge to her voice, and Pallon responded with an angry glare. Raan looked from one to the other, confused. "Pallon's my . . . brother. He tends to think he owns me." Yoris smiled again at Raan.

"I brought you back your 'com, Miss Maclarone," Raan said woodenly. He decided it wasn't worth trying to figure out what they were arguing about.

"Please--call me Yoris. Thank you for returning it. Since you're here, come have a cup of caf with me." She clipped the 'com on her belt. Raan noticed she was wearing a close-fitting tunic and pants not much different from the ones he had one. The effect, he decided, was definitely better on her. The deep garnet of the tunic picked up red highlights in her long brown hair and made her face glow. In contrast to the severe cut of the tunic, Yoris had left several top buttons open, exposing a smooth sweep of throat and a hint of breasts. Raan felt himself breathing a bit faster.

Yoris disappeared into the kitchen and returned with two steaming mugs, then led Raan into the back room. It was furnished much like the front, except for a pair of highbacked benches flanking the fireplace. Yoris shut the door and took a seat on one of the benches, patting the wood next to her in an invitation to sit down. At this hour between lunch and dinner there was no one else in the room.

Raan took a sip of caf, feeling distinctly awkward. Casting around for something to say, he asked, "Who was that older man?"

"Mekla? He owns this place."

"Why does he want to help everybody so much. I could hardly get away from him."

Yoris shrugged. "Feels guilty, I expect. He was an apprentice at Ruwenjorin, but his dad died and he had to drop out for a while to help support his mom and his family. He was going to go back, but while he was gone the imp--the government--burned the dojo and executed all the students. I suppose he wants to make it up to them or something for having survived by helping students here at the University."

Raan looked dubiously toward the closed door. "He was a Jedi rebel?"

"No. He wasn't interested in politics at all. Still isn't. He only stayed at Ruwenjorin a little while to learn the mind-healing techniques they used to teach." She moved closer to him. "Why are you so interested in Mekla?"

Raan's attempt at subterfuge seemed to be backfiring. "I'm not, really. I--"

Yoris set down her cup and smiled again. "You know, I really am glad you came. Do you have to go back right away?"

"No. I don't have a formation until day after tomorrow."

They sat silently, staring at each other. Raan was paralyzed. Did she expect more conversation, some attempt at a courtship? Did her invitation mean to her what it meant to him? How should he begin? Did she expect him to sweep her up into his arms and carry her away? Say something flowery and complimentary? He made a vague movement in her direction, then drew back uncertainly.

Yoris took matters firmly in hand. She took the mug gently away from him and set it on the floor, then slid over against him. Raan felt the feathery hair brushing softly against him and smelled her warm, clean fragrance, an enticing mixture of femaleness and a faint perfume of some sort. Raan put his hand diffidently on her shoulder. The fabric of her tunic was something soft and slightly napped; it felt like short, silky fur, it felt like--Raan's imagination turned fiercely graphic and he was overwhelmed by his hunger for her. His arms tightened around her as she turned her face up and her mouth opened under his, eager and demanding, and she pulled him down to her, melting into his body. Their kiss grew deeper, more passionate, as Yoris slid her hands inside his tunic against his bare back, her open palms tracing lines of fire down him, mingling with the growing fire within him.

As they broke apart for a breath, Yoris slid out from under him and stood up. She caught his hand. "Come on, upstairs," she said breathlessly. Raan followed her out the door and up the back flight of stairs.

The next tenday seemed to take forever or no time at all. Even while he was on duty, Yoris was constantly on Raan's mind. He moved through the dull grey sameness of headquarters corridors, imagining the bright bronze of her hair like colored leaves against an autumn sky; he touched the cold dead whiteness of armor and his hands remembered the pale-gold warmth of her body. She was always there to him, an ache of longing, and he was never quite sure afterward when his emotions moved beyond simple desire into something more complex, something almost, he felt, frightening. He begrudged every day that brought him closer to the time he had to rejoin his ship. Now and again as he lay next to her, Raan wondered with a thin thread of panic how he could bring himself to leave when he must, and strange, impossible ideas flitted through his imagination.

Surely, he thought, she must feel the same. And it seemed to him, in everything she did and said, that it was so. Raan hardly noticed anything else around him. He was only dimly aware of Khet's silent concern as Raan hurried in and out of their shared quarters, and of Mekla's fatherly satisfaction at Yoris' pleasure in Raan's presence. And the quarrels. Several times he arrived to find Yoris and Pallon arguing. The arguments ended abruptly as he appeared, and always ended the same way, with Yoris waving Pallon away with an angry, "Not yet; not yet!" She refused to tell him about them, and he at last accepted it as a necessary mystery, along with Pallon's impatient anger toward him. He could see no reason for it, but after his attempts at friendly conversation were repeatedly turned away with a cold glare, Raan shrugged and gave up.

The tenday was almost over. Raan lay next to Yoris in the upstairs room, watching the way the morning light fell across her, creating a meandering line of shadow. He idly traced the line with the tips of his finger down the warm curve of her shoulder and the hollow of her waist to her hip. Yoris opened her eyes and smiled sleepily at him. "Raan."

He half-flinched with the tingle of guilty excitement he always felt at hearing his clonename in her voice. He wondered what would happen if his brothers ever discovered he had admitted a non-clone to the secret of the names clones gave each other, their defiant and forbidden gesture against the anonymity of the Imperial system to which they were only numbers.

"Raan, Raan, Raan," Yoris said with a little laugh, and held her hand gently over his mouth as he started to protest. "Shhh--it's only me. I won't tell. I love you, Raan-the-number..."

Raan's answering kiss assured her better than words of his own feelings. A moment later he drew back, his face troubled. "Yoris, it's almost time for Lord Vader to go back to the Executor. What are we going to do?"

Yoris appeared to be struggling with some inner uncertainty of her own. After a long moment, she took a deep breath and looked him in the eye. "Raan, let's go away. To one of the rim planets. We can catch a ship today and be halfway across the galaxy before they find out either of us is gone."

"Yoris, I can't," said Raan in agony. "I'm a trooper. I belong to the Empire."

"You didn't ask to be a trooper. What choice did you ever have? And what has the Empire ever done for you, that they have a right to ask for loyalty? They didn't even let you have a name of your own! Don't you want to go somewhere where you can have something that belongs to you? Where you will be treated like a real person, and--oh, Raan--where we can be together?"

Raan found himself wanting it very much at that moment. "But what could I do there? All I know is the Service."

"The outer worlds are crying for men with good genes and tech training. If you can pilot a fighter and fix your armor, you can pilot a freighter and

fix machinery. And a lot of the isolated planets away from Imperial bases need people with military training to defend themselves. A lot of those Rim planets don't even have central ID records. They're so eager for skilled colonists they don't care who they were before or where they came from. Nobody'd ever be able to find us. We'd just disappear."

"And how are we supposed to get offplanet without anyone noticing?"

"I have a friend who owns a private runabout with permanent clearance. My name's filed with Control as an alternate pilot. Nobody would have to know you were on board."

Raan sat up against the head of the bed. "You make it sound so easy."

"Other troopers have done it."

He looked at her sharply. "How did you know that?"

She shrugged. "Everybody knows it. Stuff like that gets around, no matter how the government tries to keep it quiet."

"I'm sworn to Lord Vader. I can't do anything to hurt him."

Yoris took both of his hands gently in her own and kissed them, uncurling the clenched fingers one by one, soothing him. The gesture was infinitely tender. "I know. I know." There was sorrowful understanding in her face. "Raan, you won't be doing anything to hurt Vader. You'll just be leaving. All he'll do is authorize another vat-run of VI-series. You know he doesn't care anything about one particular clone."

Raan was stung. "That's not true; Lord Vader is loyal to his men. He cares about us."

Yoris gave an angry, disbelieving snort. "Vader is loyal to Vader and no one else. He's just using you, all of you, for his own power. If he cared anything about you, would he treat you the way he does--like droids? Like, like, things?"

Raan looked away, shaken, trying not to believe her.

She pursued relentlessly. "The minute you caused him the slightest inconvenience, the first time you did something really wrong, he'd get rid of you, wouldn't he?" Raan said nothing. "Well, wouldn't he?"

Raan remembered a succession of commanders who had not survived inconveniencing his lord during the Hoth campaign. "Yes, he would. I guess. But--"

"But nothing! You're like a piece of equipment to him, that's all. As long as you're operational, you'll get proper maintenance. As soon as you malfunction, you'll get scrapped. Can't you see it? Do you want to live like that?" The soft ping of Yoris' chronoalarm interrupted her, and she swore in frustration. "Oh, no! Damn! I don't want to go, but I'm going to be late for class if I don't. If I don't attend this class, it'll look very suspicious if we turn up missing later. There's a test today." She pulled Raan to her and gave him a desperate,

feverish kiss. "I'll be back as soon as I can. Please, Raan, think about it. It's the only way. You will think about what I said?"

"Yes, I will," he promised.

After Yoris left, Raan dressed slowly and wandered downstairs into the main room. He felt that he couldn't think at all in the room he had shared with Yoris so recently, where everything spoke to him so persuasively of her and her plans. But there was nowhere that he could escape. He sat down and stared gloomily at the opposite wall. She made it sound so easy; so easy and--so reasonable--he thought. The weariness of the long campaign just ended washed over him. It had been cold, always so cold, it seemed to him as he remembered it: the icy wind of Girim, the winter battle in the snows of Hoth, where everything was white--white and cold--as the snow and the rebel emplacements that spat destruction at them, and the crumpled bodies, rebel and Imperial alike white and cold in death; and the aching cold of space that waited just outside his TIE. He remembered the dogfights with rebel fighters, his own TIE a mote in the black and hungry infinity of absolute zero, extinction a fraction of an inch away, held at bay by a thin sheet of metal, fragile against the power of the icy blackness. Black and white, Raan thought; black and white--no color at all; and even the burning is cold, there in space.

He saw his wingman die again, hit by a glancing laserbolt during the rebel evacuation of Hoth: the TIE out of control, spinning over and over helplessly, sparking and burning white against the black like some obscene parody of a child's holiday sparkler, until the fighter exploded and there was nothing left. **Why?** Raan thought: **to die and disappear into that meaningless darkness, and leave nothing behind, not even a name.** Why; who would care? The Empire would plug another clone pilot into his place, into his ship or his ship's replacement, like a mechanic exchanging a faulty transistor. And Lord Vader? Raan's fealty to that remote and terrible figure had been the center of his life. But what if Yoris was right? Lord Vader was not demonstrative with his men. How could he know for sure what lay behind the Dark Lord's expressionless mask?

He took in the cheerful room around him. Morning sunshine lay over it like gold, the friendly smell of caf and buttered toast filled the air, and even the rough wood of the old tables and the uneven stone floor seemed unassuming and comfortable. The bright red of a spray of flowers from one of the hanging plants caught and held his eye. **This must be what it was to be one of the Others,** Raan thought: **to be in a warm and comfortable place, a place full of colors, and wait for someone whom you knew would not die, who would come back.** The gentle crackle of the fire fell on his ear. Suddenly it contrasted unbearably in his mind with the brilliant, soundless white burning of his wingman's death. He covered his face with his hands, rubbing his closed eyes as if to drive away the remembered image.

What was he to do?

"Radin?" Raan looked up at the voice. He had

vaguely noticed Mekla sitting across the room with Pallon. The old man walked over to his table and put his hand on the back of a chair. "May I join you?"

Raan managed a distracted smile. "Of course, Sir."

"What is it? You look upset. Did you and Yoris quarrel?"

Raan looked at Mekla and then looked away again.

"You can tell me, son. I promise it won't go any further, and maybe I can help. Sometimes it helps just to talk to someone."

Why not? thought Raan. **Who else can I talk to?** Would Khet turn him in if he decided to bolt? He didn't know. For all his cheerful insolence, his lack of awe toward his superiors and his bending of minor regulations, the sergeant was, in the final analysis, a trooper first and last, loyal to the Empire. Would friendship mean more to him than duty? Raan could not be sure.

And his commander? Raan had a bizarre mental image of trying to explain his situation to Lord Vader, and shuddered.

"Yes," said Raan. **It helps to talk.** But how much could he say? He found himself rambling on, trying to explain the conflict within him, trying not to give away too much. ". . . I do love Yoris. At least, I think I do. And I'm sure she feels the same; but how can I give up everything I've ever had, everything I've ever known, to run away to the Rim worlds? There are people I owe and people I've made promises to. I can't just quit. What good will my word be to Yoris if I don't keep the promises I've already made? I don't know what to do."

"I understand. You are a good man, Radin. An honorable man." Mekla was silent for a time, staring at the tabletop. "Yoris' happiness is very important to me. I knew her father years ago, and Yoris has been like a daughter to me since she was born. I want you both to make the right choice." He looked up again. "Have you ever heard of the Force?"

"That magic thing the old Jedi were supposed to have? They told us in school that was just a superstition."

"It was real. I studied at Ruwenjorin, and I saw it."

Raan shrugged. "Anyway, it's all gone now. There aren't any more Jedi."

"No, there aren't any more Jedi." Mekla's face was distant, full of regret and past sorrows. His face hardened. "There was only one who survived--the only who destroyed them all. The renegade. The traitor. Darth Vader."

Raan was startled almost beyond caution. At the last minute he clamped his teeth on his tongue. Lord Vader a Jedi? The idea seemed ridiculous, impossible; he was tempted to dismiss it as the old man's imagination. And yet, Mekla had been at Ruwenjorin, had been, however briefly, an apprentice

among the Jedi. He could hardly be mistaken about such a thing--and, yes; it was possible. Stories about the Jedi and their powers came back to Raan, horror stories whispered under the warmers at night in the clonebarracks, stories from sensational tri-D episodes and the more flamboyant popular histories he had viewed. Raan remembered the unexplained things he had seen Lord Vader do, and the other events his clonebrothers who had served with the Dark Lord had told him. They matched. Lord Vader's powers were Jedi powers.

Dawning excitement clenched a knot in Raan's belly, and even his worries about Yoris receded for the moment. Jedi powers, it was said, could be learned. How long had he wondered about Lord Vader's power and imagined using something similar himself? Why, a man with Jedi powers could go anywhere and do almost anything. Could even find a new life on the Rim worlds. . .

"I was only at Ruwenjorin one semester," Mekla was saying as Raan's attention returned to him. "I learned a little about the mind-healing techniques and meditation. The Masterjedi really could do all those things you hear about--read minds, influence other people's thoughts, move matter by mind, see the past and the future--lots of things. But the techniques I learned are useful for calming your mind and sorting out your emotions. I think they could help you make your decision. Would you like to try and see?"

"Yes," said Raan. "I'd like to try."

All during this conversation, Raan had half-noticed Pallon at the other table looking more and more agitated, but he had paid no attention. He had long since given up trying to understand Pallon. As Raan rose and followed Mekla out of the room and up the stairs toward a less public area, Pallon stood up abruptly and came after them. Raan and Mekla stepped into one of the smaller upstairs rooms, and as Pallon moved to follow, the older man put out a hand to forestall him. Pallon pushed past him and shut the door behind the three of them. The layout of the little room impinged marginally on Raan's consciousness; it was almost an exact duplicate of the room he had shared with Yoris.

"You can't do this, Mekla." Pallon's voice was low and deadly. "You can't let Yoris go with him. He's a clone. An imperial 'shell.'"

Mekla and Raan recoiled with almost identical gestures of shocked surprise.

"And you, you--" Pallon gave Raan a death's-head imitation smile. Some detached part of Raan's mind admired Pallon's imaginative profanity. "Did you really think Yoris was in love with you? How could a real woman love a thing like you that isn't even human?" He laughed without humor. "She was just using you to get to Vader. We have plans for that wonderful Dark Lord of yours. Yoris isn't going anywhere with you; she belongs to me."

Suddenly there was a blaster in Pallon's hand. At the sight of the weapon, Raan's trained reflexes took over. Without thinking, he dropped to the floor and rolled behind the bed. As Pallon's blasterbolt sizzled past his ear, he pulled his own blaster from the vest holster and snapped off a 'stun' shot--among civilians he had not wanted the

gun set to kill. Pallon crumpled to the floor, still wearing a look of surprise. Raan rolled over to his knees and fanned the blaster again to make sure, catching Mekla in the edge of the wide-angle stunbeam.

Raan rose cautiously to his feet. **Silver Front**, he thought; **Pallon must be Silver Front**. They specialized in terrorism and ambushes. They weren't used to victims who shot back.

A familiar patter of feet came up the stairs. "Raan, are you in here--" Yoris opened the door and stepped in before she saw the blaster in Raan's hand. She almost fell over Pallon's body, recovered herself with a startled gasp. She stared at Raan, horrified. "Are they--"

Raan reached the door in several long strides, slapped it shut and locked it in one swift movement. He thrust his blaster back into the holster. "They're only stunned. Look at them."

Yoris slumped with a sigh of relief and closed her eyes for a brief moment. Then she straightened to face Raan uncertainly. "Now," he said coldly. "Just what did you have to do with this?"

Yoris licked her lips. "With what?"

"Pallon told me about a plot against Lord Vader." Raan took hold of Yoris in a firm grip with one hand above each elbow. "I want to know all about it and I want to know now. And it had better be the truth, Yoris."

"It was an assassination. Vader. Silver Front." Yoris' words came in hesitant spurts. She looked away from Raan. "I couldn't go through with it. Not after I . . .knew you, and I knew what he meant to you. I couldn't do that to you, not even for the rebellion. No matter what Vader is." She looked back at him and there was a catch in her voice. "I love you, Raan. We have to go away, both of us. Where they can't find you and the Front can't find me. Now."

Raan simply stared at her. Nothing penetrated except the threat to his lord. "Are you out of your mind? This has to be reported to Lord Vader at once."

"But they're harmless now. They can't do anything they were planning without you; they can't hurt Vader now. And he'd kill them--you know he would." Yoris sounded desperate. "I can't have that on my conscience. Pallon trusted me."

"He'd kill them," Raan mimicked. "They--you--were trying to kill him. What did you think you were doing? Playing some kind of game?" He released her, but she caught his hands in her own.

"Raan, what I said this morning was the truth. Vader doesn't need you, doesn't care about you. It won't make any difference to Vader whether you go or not."

Raan was quiet for a minute, then said in a calmer tone, "Whether it makes any difference to him or not doesn't matter. I'm sworn to Lord Vader; it would make a difference to me."

Yoris dropped his hands with a defeated gesture. "What are you going to do?" she asked in a dead voice.

Raan looked at her for a long, silent time, conflicting emotions playing across his face. Then, half-ashamed: "All right. Maybe I'm an idiot. Maybe you're still playing a game. I don't know. But I can't turn you in. Go on; get out of here."

Hope flared in Yoris' expression, mixed with regret. She backed toward the door and stopped with her hand above the control. Then, reluctantly, she turned back. She swallowed. "Please, Raan. Will you let Pallon go, too? He can't do anything now."

"Don't push your luck," Raan said coldly.

Yoris swallowed hard again and said in a quivering voice, "I can't go without him."

"How noble."

"You don't understand. How long do you think I'd stay alive if the Front found out I'd left him behind? They'd track me down all the way across the galaxy, no matter where I went. The Front wouldn't really care about me, or about Mekla, but Pallon--"

"But Pallon's one of the Silver Front's good little heroes. And I'm supposed to let him go."

"Please, Raan. What harm can he do now?"

"Shut up," he snarled. "The Silver Front had killed too many troopers for me to let one of them go." Abruptly, he came to a decision. "All right. If you won't go without Pallon, you'll have to go with him. It's the best I can do. Do I have to stun you?"

"No, Raan. You don't have to stun me." Yoris sat down listlessly on the bed and put her head in her hands.

Raan paced the room, trying to think. Several times his hand hovered above the room 'com outlet, then retreated. Finally, he pulled out the military personacom from inside his vest and keyed in a series of digits.

"R1538 here."

"K4983 here."

"Yo, little brother," Khet's cheerful voice responded. "What's up?"

"I've got a problem. I can't talk over this channel. Where are you and what are you doing right now?"

"I'm at," Khet hesitated briefly, "section twelve, block four. With the patrol. We're out huntin' game--worse luck."

Raan breathed an inaudible "thank you" to whatever power protected clones. "Get down here with the patrol on the double. I've got a rebel in custody and I think the locals are getting restless outside."

"Roger, Lieutenant. What's your location?"

Shortly thereafter, Raan, Khet, the squad of troopers, and the three prisoners arrived at the door of their commanding officer's office at headquarters. As Raan and Khet herded the prisoners inside, the lieutenant took in the room. It was austere and functional, but the furnishings spoke eloquently of wealth and taste. The thick rug was animal fiber, not synthetics, and a priceless original statue sat casually on a corner table. The hand-rubbed wood paneling was left bare to show its rich grain. A heavy antique desk of dark wood, in scale with the massive figure of its occupant, dominated the center of the floor. Considering how seldom the Dark Lord was at headquarters, Raan reflected, it was proof of his rank and influence that this huge--and expensive--office was left untouched between his visits.

Vader's commanding presence filled the room. Raan's spine stiffened, and he fixed his eyes on the stooping luthra-hawk inlaid in silvery metal into the front of the Dark Lord's desk. From the soft clattering behind him, Raan could tell Khet was straightening to a more rigid 'attention.'

Raan coughed nervously. "K4983 reporting, my Lord. I have one confirmed rebel prisoner, and two--" He hesitated, searching for the proper time, and failed to find it.

Vader observed them silently. Raan felt a tingling, creeping sensation he put down to his overwrought nerves, as he hunted for some explanation which would convince the Dark Lord of Yoris' and Mekla's innocence. Before the lieutenant could formulate anything concrete, Vader made an abrupt gesture. "Yes; these three will serve admirably. Erase their memories of this episode, and release them under observation."

"You aren't going to kill us?" Yoris choked out, disbelieving.

The Dark Lord gave her an indifferent metal stare. "I do not intend to provide the rebellion with unnecessary martyrs. And eventually you will lead me to the rest of your group."

Raan felt relief and a dull regret. Yoris would be unharmed; he would not be responsible for turning her over to punishment, and for that he was heartily grateful to his lord. But a brain-wipe would destroy all her memories of this time and of him. She would be no more his after it than any other stranger. All Khet's practical reasons for avoiding entanglements with a non-clone returned, like a crowd of voices babbling and jeering at him, all talking at once, all saying mockingly, "I told you so." He bowed his head and numbly accepted the voices' chatter, trying to ignore the cold hollow pain of the part of him which refused to believe and agree. It was useless to think about it; there was nothing he could do.

The Dark Lord sent the prisoners away under guard, and Raan was left facing his commander alone. He girded himself for the ordeal. "Now, Lieutenant," Vader said, "report."

Next to the size and the power radiating from the Dark Lord, Raan shrank to a clonechild facing his barracks master. He was defenseless. It was impossible to lie. Even to shade the truth required an effort of will he could not muster against his

lord. Without giving himself time for his nerve to fail, Raan poured out the entire story.

". . . And when the old man offered to teach me about the Force, Pallon pulled a blaster on me. I realized he was a rebel and brought them all in, my Lord." He squirmed under the compulsion of Vader's relentless gaze and added reluctantly, "I would have let the girl go. She wasn't really. . . she didn't actually. . ." There was no genuine objective evidence he could give to prove Yoris was not part of Pallon's plot in the end. He believed her; he had to believe her, but his reasons were formless and subjective, not part of a military report. He fell silent and waited, full of foreboding. Even if he lived after this, he would be demoted to. . . Raan's antic subconscious, even at this moment, came up with the ludicrous image of scrubbing down an endless sequence of latrines with a brush the size of a toothbrush--a comic vision of eternal torment.

"Very good, Lieutenant. You are restricted to quarters until further notice. Dismissed."

The ghost of a sigh of relief escaped Raan before he recovered. Swallowing the unmilitary sound, he saluted with "Yes, my Lord," spun on his heel and marched out.

The full impact of the situation came home to him as he walked slowly back toward his quarters. The question repeated itself endlessly: **What does Lord Vader intend to do with me?** He could not believe it had ended with this and that he had escaped so easily. The resolution which had been created by the rush of events and fear for his lord drained out of him, to be replaced by clammy terror.

The room was deserted. Khet's armor and kitbag remained, but the VIII-clone was gone, and Raan suspected he had been sent somewhere else for the period of Raan's unofficial arrest. Raan was half-glad to be spared having to face him. He paced back and forth, trying to bring some order into his thoughts. His career was dead. Lord Vader would never promote a trooper who had been involved, however innocently, with a rebel plot on his life, nor one who had ambitions to emulate his magical powers. Perhaps Lord Vader intended to make an example of him. Thoughts of the ghastly devices used to extract information from suspected traitors turned him cold. Courage, strength--or innocence--were useless against the diabolical things that ripped the victim's mind apart or reduced him to a helpless, gabbling huddle, confessing whatever he could think of to stop the pain. Raan's belly knotted in fear, and he paced. And paced.

Half a dozen times during the night Raan considered making a run for it. He thought longingly and hopelessly of trying to rescue Yoris before the mind-wipe. He could not believe it was possible, yet even if Yoris was lost to him, her plan was still available. It still seemed seductively possible: put on the civilian clothes, stow away, head out to lose himself on one of the rim worlds. Others had done it. He had done his duty by reporting the plot, and his oath to Lord Vader was satisfied. His honor was satisfied, and now he could save himself.

But each time he was checked by the cold voice of logic. He had no idea how to find a suitable ship. If he ran, he would be running forever--

running from the Empire, running from the Silver Front, running through an alien world, boundless, unknown, and terrifying, a world outside his experience. He could think of no one who would help him, now Yoris was gone. Once the other world discovered he was a clone--he could never hide it, never pass as a non-clone among non-clones over time--it would destroy him. The conditioned fears of early childhood spoke to him, of Others, tall huge, threatening, different and thus ultimately frightening; of the Whitecoat Man who, under the authority of the Others, culled the inferior and the disobedient among his brothers. Fear, fear, fear, each beat of his heart said, and even the known threat of torture and death seemed less dreadful than the unknown dangers of facing the outside world alone. However little future he had here, he had even less there.

At last he reached a state of dreamy nervous exhaustion. He simply did not have the strength to fear any longer. Whatever Lord Vader intended to do with him, he said to himself, he had no right to rebel. He was a trooper, a clone, and his lord's sworn man. His life was the Dark Lord's, to spend as he saw fit in battle or otherwise. It was all the same. Raan bent his head, gave a long shuddering sigh that was almost a sob, and sank down on the edge of his bunk.

As soon as he came to this decision, a new strength flowed into him. Where it came from, he had no idea, but it seemed like something outside himself. There was an immense power in it, underlain by cold arrogance and a sense of satisfaction. For a moment, Raan was uneasy again, as if he were being invaded by an alien presence, then he surrendered to the feeling. He sighed again, closed his eyes, and sank into sleep.

* * * *

Raan was prodded awake by a man in the black uniform and bowl helmet of security. "Lord Vader wants to see you," he growled.

As Raan walked down the corridor with the guard, he had the clean, empty feeling inside of one who had made his peace with fate, like an ancient pagan about to be sacrificed to his god. The sense of resignation so laboriously achieved the night before remained with him. He entered Vader's office, saluted, and stood lightheaded and breathless with a sensation past terror that was almost exaltation. He waited for the blow to fall.

"I have followed your thoughts," the Dark Lord said. "I am pleased." Raan felt as if he had been doused with icy water as he expelled the breath he had not realized he was holding. When his hearing focused again, Vader was saying, "You are loyal, K4983, and that I value." An amused, considering tone: "And you are ambitious. Most ambitious. You want to learn about the Force."

There was no way Raan could deny it. "Yes, my Lord."

"Men without ambition make poor officers. But the training in the Force is difficult and dangerous, not to be undertaken halfheartedly."

"Yes, my Lord." Vague hope solidified into concrete ambition. Raan wanted the Force,

wholeheartedly, no matter what it would require of him to get it. Vader's mask was cocked slightly to one side, a considering attitude; and as he watched, the Dark Lord slowly nodded.

"Very well," Vader said, as if to himself. He put his hands on his belt. "There is some resentment that I use only VI-clones for my Guard, is there not?" he said in a tone that suggested he cared not at all who disapproved of anything he did.

"Yes, my Lord," said Raan again. The Dark Lord seemed to be waiting for something--an explanation, commentary, opinion; Raan wasn't sure. He blundered on. "The other series think we're lucky. Sometimes we can outguess the enemy, or find things; that's why we're scouts, I guess. I don't know why, Sir. It's always been that way with VIs."

"There is no such thing as luck," said Vader. "K4983, the VI-series are cloned from a Force-sensitive original, although the Imperial technicians who chose that original did not know it. The VI-series are intuitive, and they... respond."

The sensation Raan had felt the previous night returned, stronger now. It was as if his mind were being stripped naked, pulled apart, and reassembled; a painful, stomach-turning wrench like something long locked shut being forced open. Raan set his teeth against the crawling nausea. He felt a new awareness, a stirring, an expanding of his perception--a sense uncertainly liberated. There was a recognition of identity, perhaps; Raan felt something similar to the sense of completeness he had known so often as part of clonebarracks, but although the sensation was vaguely similar, the identity was different: dark and powerful, and full of assurance and absolute command. The whirling confusion sorted itself, sharpening into a direct perception, an identity, a--person. With astonishment and some fear, Raan realized he was feeling Vader's persona in the Force. It could not be anything else.

Abruptly, Vader released him, and Raan caught the edge of the desk to keep from falling. After a minute, his breathing slowed and he shakily straightened.

"Adequate," the Dark Lord said coldly. "You have some Force ability; you may prove useful. I will teach you what you are capable of learning."

"Thank you, my Lord," Raan said faintly. He gulped several times, hoping he would not disgrace himself by vomiting in front of Lord Vader. He felt dizzy, as if he had run a long way at high altitude.

"When you have recovered, we will begin." The Dark Lord returned to his desk and seated himself. "You work well with R1538, Lieutenant." There was a certain dry irony in the Dark Lord's voice. "I am placing him under your command. Dismissed."

"Yes, my Lord." Raan saluted and retreated gratefully toward the door. Just before he reached it, Vader added, without looking up from the computer terminal, "K4983, your assigned quarters have been transferred. My officers, whoever they are, will receive proper respect and be quartered as befits their rank. Henceforth, I will expect you to act accordingly."

"Yes, Sir." Raan saluted and exited with relief. He stood outside the door for several minutes until his rebellious stomach was fully under control. The guard watched him with growing concern and finally asked, "Are you all right, Sir?"

"Yes, Jorund; I'm fine."

Taking a deep breath, Raan squared his shoulders and headed down the corridor toward his new quarters. As he walked, he sorted out the welter of confused emotions within him. He still felt the dull ache of Yoris' loss, and he suspected it would remain with him permanently, but it was retreating into a memory, improbable, meaningless, too incredible even for regret. Here in the reality of headquarters and barracks which had surrounded him all his life, Raan could not actually believe he had considered running away with one of the Others. With Lord Vader's presence vivid in his mind, the idea seemed as impossible as a dream.

Lord Vader. His lord, and truly his own lord now, Raan thought. He was still caught in the same uneasy position, neither fully clone nor fully officer, but in Lord Vader he had found a home and an anchor to replace the comradeship of clonebarracks, a firm support against the hostility of the Others. It was enough.

"K4983! Haven't seen you around much this tenday. How's the hyper-lag?"

Raan looked up to see Sheret smiling at him. He was almost to his new quarters in the junior officers' section, and the other lieutenant was coming out of his own door. Raan smiled back. "Just fine. I think it's gone now. I feel a lot better."

"Great. how about a rematch sometime soon, down at the 'game theater? This time, I'll show what I really can do with a little decent opposition. Haven't hardly had a partner who could find his way around the board without the manual all tenday."

Raan grinned. A weight lifted from his shoulders, and he suddenly felt irrationally cheerful. "You're on, Sheret. I'm gonna beat the pants off you!"

Maybe things weren't going to be so bad after all.*



PROLOGUE

DEVRA MICKELE LANGSAM

Anakin stared dubiously at the half-empty glass in his hand, shook his head, and replaced it carefully on the table. "Pardon, General; perhaps I didn't hear you correctly."

"But you did, Skywalker. I want to train you as a Jedi."

"Begging the General's pardon, I KNOW that a senior officer never makes foolish suggestions, so it must be my understanding that's at fault. Or perhaps I've had too much to drink."

Obi-Wan Kenobi threw his gaze toward the ceiling of the comfortable bar where the two officers sat, then sighed gustily. "Don't go all 'career officer' on me, Anakin. Pull the ramrod out of your backbone and listen to me."

"General, why?"

"Why what? Why should you listen to me, or why do I want to train you?"

Anakin Skywalker, Lieutenant Commander in the Royal Air Navy of Alderaan, Aide-de-Camp to General Master Obi-Wan Kenobi, Jedi Master and Special Advisor to His Majesty Bail Organa, grimaced and shook his head. "Yes, General, I'm listening."

"Good. Now, I want to train you as a Jedi because you have one of the most impressive Force-auras I've ever encountered. You're a brilliant pilot and a fine tactician, and we need you working for the Alliance."

Anakin shifted in his chair, which was, as usual, too small for his outsize frame. "Of course I have Force-ability; it's widespread in my House. But you must have dozens of other people who have more. When I was a child, there was some talk about my going to the Jedi, but His Majesty was against it. Why should he let me be sent away now?"

"Times and circumstances have changed, Anakin." Kenobi leaned forward confidentially. "Then, the Jedi had their pick of candidates. Now, with the Senatorial edicts against us, fewer people care to declare themselves our friends. BUT--Alderaan needs our aid in this war, and His Majesty may not mind trading your potential value for my help."

"Blackmail?" Skywalker asked. "I had no idea I was so important."

"To His Majesty, or to me?" Kenobi asked, smiling into his beard, and refilling his glass.

"Oh, to both, of course," Anakin replied. "Will he really let me go off-planet?"

"No," Kenobi said.

"Well, that's that, isn't it?" Skywalker asked.

"No, no." Kenobi leaned even farther across the table. "I wouldn't have sent you to the regular schools in any case--they won't take anyone over the age of 14. I was planning to train you myself if we couldn't send you to one of the special schools. That might have been better, for someone with your . . .um. . .strong opinions. . ."

"I trust that I have not given the General any cause for complaint in regard to my temper or any of my personal habits," Skywalker said stiffly, his hands open on the surface of the table in a way that ought to have reflected calmness, but instead radiated rigid control.

"They really do ride you about your behavior, don't they?" Kenobi said, shaking his head. "It's not easy being a cousin of the king, is it?" When Skywalker did not respond, Kenobi lifted his glass and drank, then continued, "Well, I'd like to send you off to my old master, but since that's not possible, I'll take next best, and that's to train you here."

"His Majesty has agreed to it, and I hope that you'll agree also. I think that you could be a fine Jedi, maybe even a great one. And we need you; we need every man we can get." He put down his glass and placed his hand encouragingly on Anakin's tense one. "I think you'll find it a great challenge."

There was silence for a few moments. Skywalker stared broodingly at the table top, and Obi-Wan waved at a passing waiter and ordered another bottle. After he had broached it and tasted approvingly, he refilled both glasses. "Come now, drink up. Don't insult a fine vintage."

Automatically, Skywalker drank. After a few swallows, some of the tension drained out of him and he relaxed a bit into his chair.

"And if you're thinking," Kenobi continued calmly, "that His Majesty agreed to your training only because he wants to distract you from what he considers an unsuitable attachment to Her Highness your cousin, well--"

Skywalker's fingers tightened around the stem of the glass.

"Well," Kenobi continued, smiling, "no harm in letting someone think that he's done something clever, if it lets you do what you want also, is there?"

"No," Skywalker said finally, "I suppose not." His fingers loosened, and he looked up at the General. "Perhaps there might be some...advantages...to becoming a Jedi wizard."

"Yes, there can be. Many advantages. Well, then, shall we begin your training tomorrow? I think that you'll find it challenging, very challenging."

Anakin smiled. "If His Majesty will let me do this, then perhaps someday he'll let go of my leash completely. At any rate, this way I'll be ready if he does."

"General, I will be happy to have you as my master. I'll be the finest Jedi that the Royal House of Alderaan has ever produced, I promise you!"*



FUGATO

Once
Upon a twist of fate
My father stood
Before this evil
Darkness fell
Proud and fair
Against the shadows
Young
And desperate
Like my father
Before me
I face the darkness
In my turn
In my turn
I will not be consumed
Like my father
Before me
I am a Jedi
Because
I believe
I understand
I like my father;
I like him.

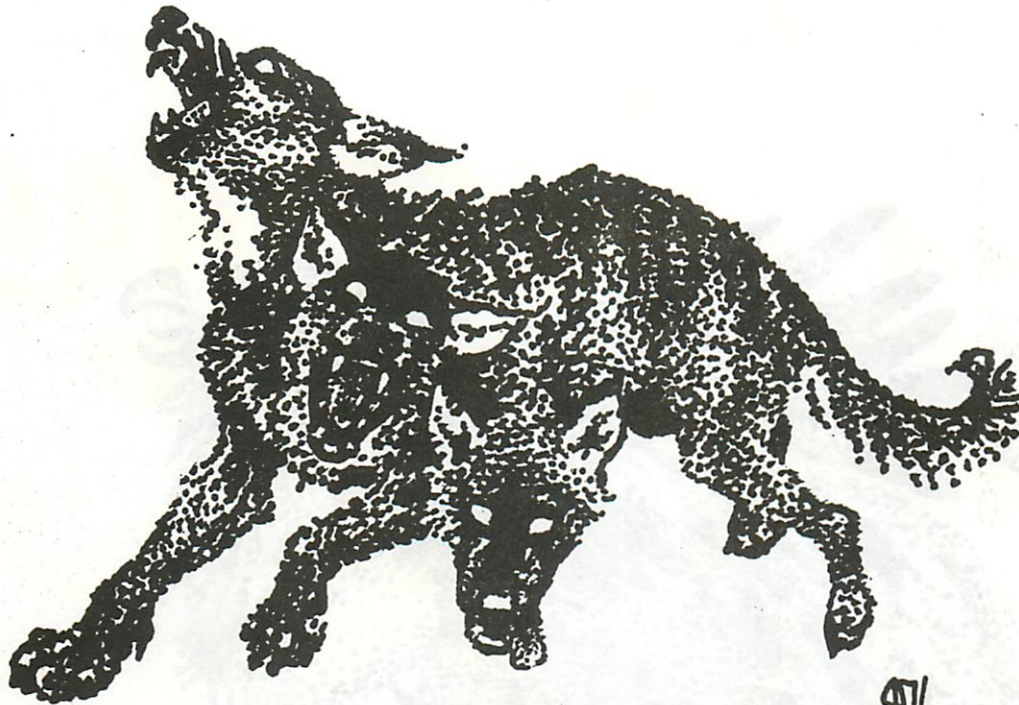
Liz Sharpe



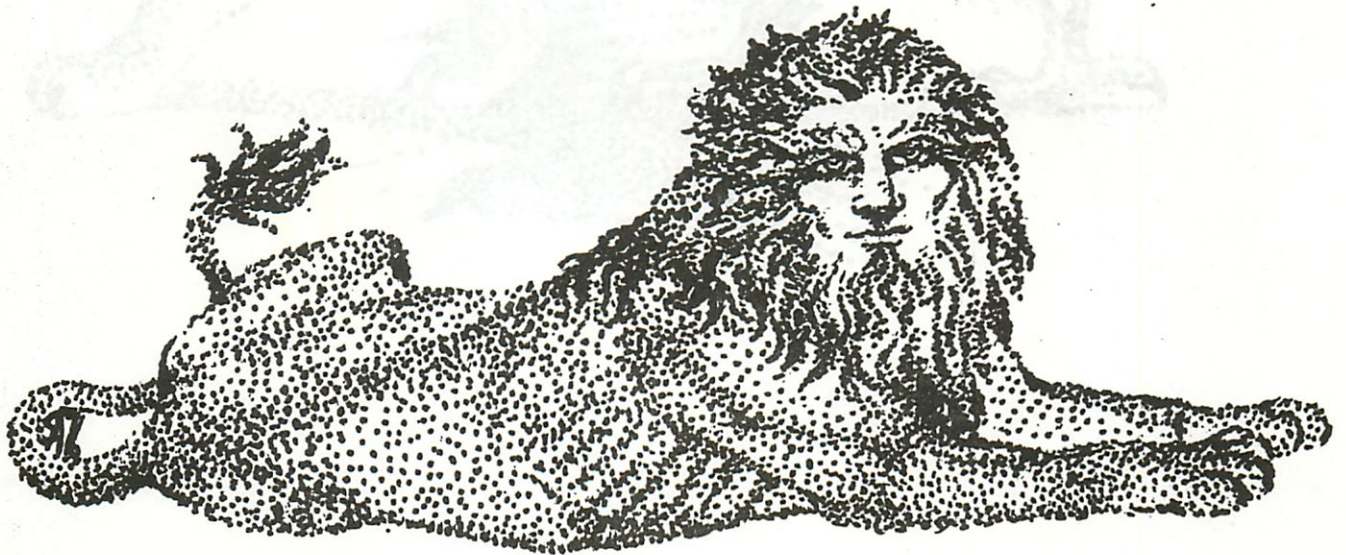
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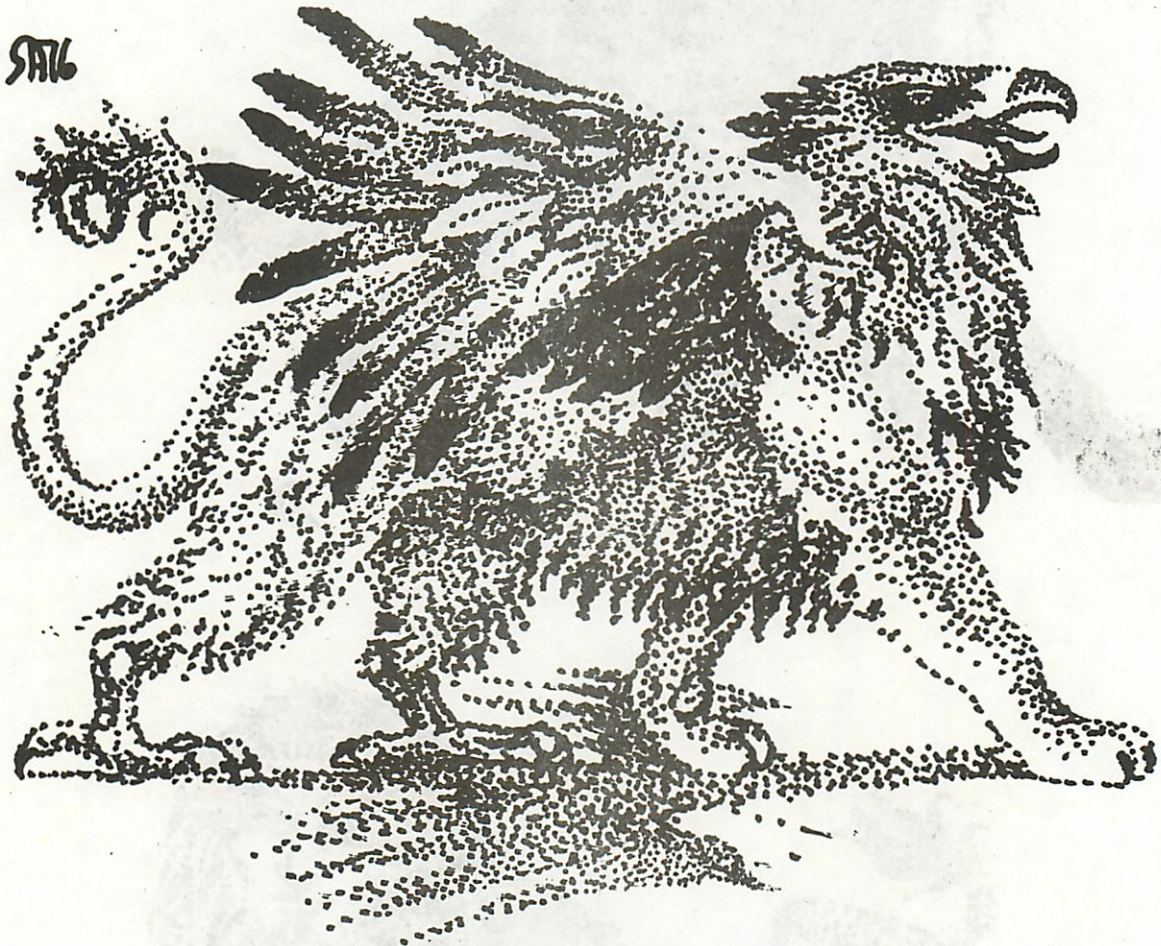
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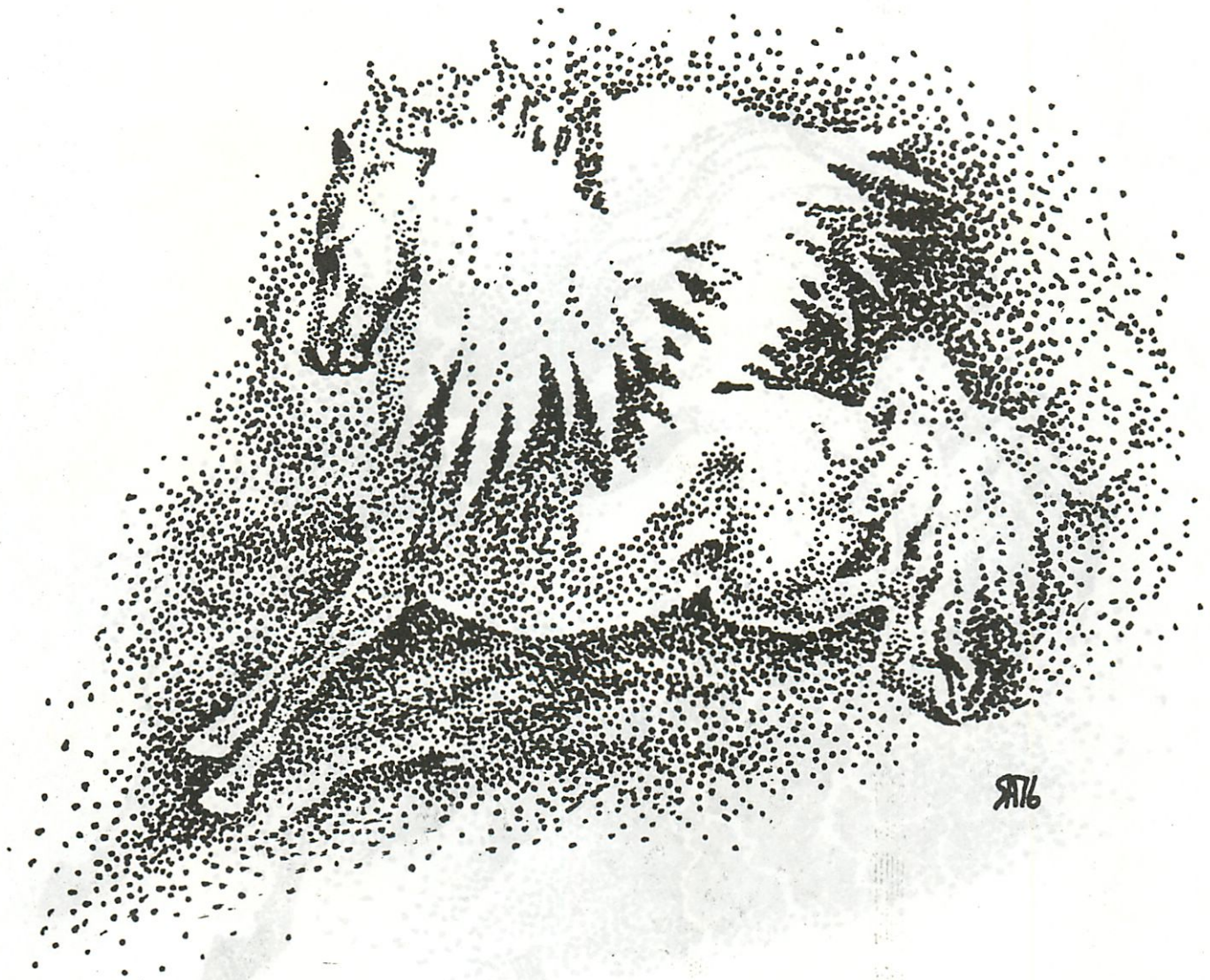
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Armstrong



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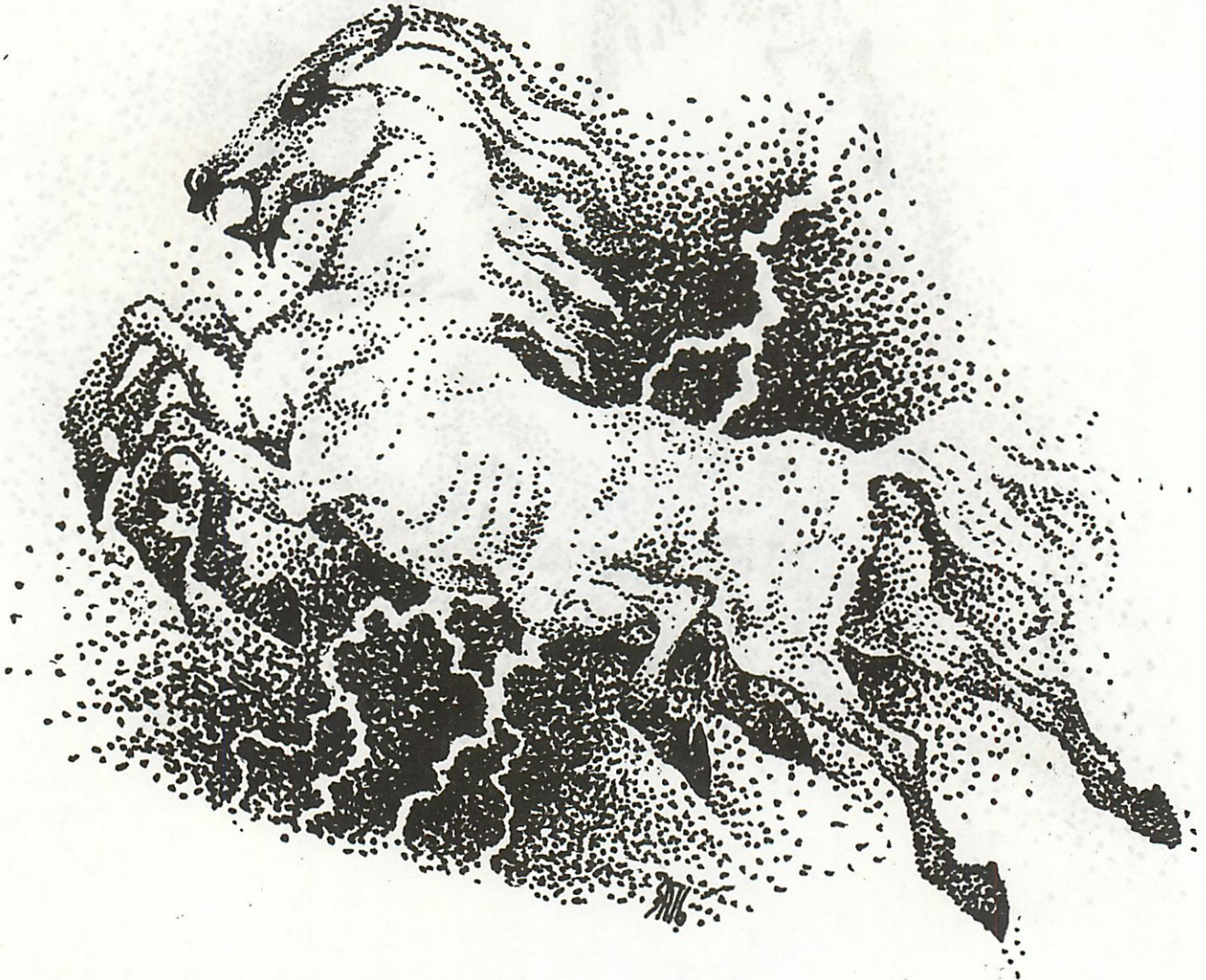






91R





Lost Love

Sometimes in the night I think I dreamed you
You came storming into life and made me feel
At a moment when my everything had vanished into dust
You forced me to believe that love was real.

Oh, lonely man,
I'll save my lonely heart for you
I'll never give up hoping you'll return
Oh, lonely man,
Don't dream that you're forgotten
I'll remember just as long as stars can burn.



Sometimes in the night I fear I dreamed you
That my hopeless life is barren, dusty gray
And all my friends are strangers, and my enemies will win
And then I rise to meet another day.

And I remember
How you swagger when you walk
And I remember
How others listen when you talk
Yes, I remember
How the light shines in your eyes
And the magic when you fly the starry skies.

Sometimes every day I know I love you
And sometimes I can believe you cared for me
Yet I know that frozen time can turn a lifelove into dust
And then I hope that you'll remember me.

(First chorus: repeat last line once)

Music and lyrics by Jean L. Stevenson



MEDICINAE

VIVIAN GATES

Prologue:

I chose the Vulcan way when I was a young child, but now I realize that I had no choice. Of all on the planet, perhaps only my mother questioned the correctness of the choice. And she knew the futility of opposing the community in the matter.

I was raised to be Vulcan. I now believe that a certain segment of Vulcan society considered my existence and training a sociological experiment designed to prove the superiority of traditional Vulcan ideology. My belief in the Vulcan way was sincere. My mind accepted the teachings. But some part of me did not. My...heart? When I chose Star Fleet as a career, I thought I was seeking my heritage, that I was rejecting my father's autocratic plan for my future. Yet I chose to be Vulcan at the Academy, and later, in Star Fleet. Again, it was not a real choice. Vulcan was the only way I knew.

When the last mission of the *Enterprise* was concluded, the captain was promoted and I knew I would not be with him and the crew. I realized that I had been changed by my life off Vulcan. The regret I felt---and yes, the anger that came to me as I realized the emotions---showed me I was not living as I had been raised to live. But I did not consider how to come to terms with my new self, only how to return to the Vulcan way. I chose the strictest of the teaching ways, the most rigorous and most difficult course to the ultimate in Vulcan teaching. Yet even then...

Until V'ger showed me the truth of myself. I am an emotional being. I had been attempting to deny my own physical and mental composition. I was amazed to realize that the human part of me, which I had suppressed, contained the only thing V'ger didn't have---and wanted.

I lay in sickbay considering all that had happened, and I knew it would take much thought to redesign my life around the truths I now recognized. V'ger searched for the creator, for evolution and growth, for the culmination of the purpose of its existence. It collected all knowledge; its logic and methods were perfect according to the Vulcan teachings. There was nothing else, and it searched outside itself for more. But I had more---within me.

More than I knew. I have looked carefully at what I am and what I want for the future. I am... Spock. I am comfortable with science. I wish to continue as a scientist. I want the varied opportunities that Star Fleet offers. I want emotional relationships. Friendship. I know I have shared friendship reluctantly. Receiving friendship, I have offered a thin substitute in return, friendship hidden and sly, disguised in duty.

And I want love. Love, denied also, but experienced. I took love, mother love, woman love, and offered back the excuse of my Vulcanness. Leila showed me love, and Zarabeth, and both gave me physical and emotional pleasure. And when I chose, I chose to leave, thinking that to follow the way was more important.

Dr. Chapel was different only because no accident had thrown us into complete intimacy. I would have treated her similarly. I used her love as a goad to my virtue. She loved and I rejected, supposing my cruelty to be non-emotion. There were actions I could have taken to remove her affection. I did not. Did I suspect my true self drawn to her? There was eye contact whenever I was in a room with her. Initiated, I had thought, by her.

The Platonians forced me to lie upon her. I remember her lips. They had painted her eyes into a semblance of a Vulcan's, and her tears smeared the make-up.

I wish to find myself---the balance between the Vulcan I am not and the Human I cannot be. The choice I made as a child was no choice. Only the immature would insist on adhering to a course of action after it had become evident that it was not appropriate.

In Star Fleet it will not be difficult to translate my new awareness into action. My work is as it has been. Friendships wait only to be re-kindled. McCoy will be surprised. I hope he is...pleased. There remains only to consider most carefully...Christine.

* * *



Spock walked briskly into sickbay, not disturbing the manufactured quiet. The nurse on duty looked up from his screen, questioning, but at that moment, Dr. McCoy came out of his office. Seeing Spock, he drifted over with the careful economy of a man who had been up too late the night before. "Hello, Spock. You look disgustingly healthy," he said with a half sigh that ended in a smile.

"I am afraid you do not look as well as you might, Doctor," Spock replied gravely. "Shore leave seems to have left you a candidate for your own services."

"You noticed, did you?" commented McCoy mildly, rubbing his neck and shoulder ruefully. "First shore leave for the new *Enterprise*. I'm getting too old to keep up with these new junior officers, Spock. I'm still wondering how Jim talked me into signing up for this next five-year mission." He gestured Spock into his office, and continued, "What can we do for you?"

"I was in search of Dr. Chapel. She is scheduled as the physician on duty."

"So she is. I just got a call from her a few minutes ago. She'll be delayed and asked me to cover for her. Some problem with the transporter planetside." The doctor's expression left little doubt of his opinion on that mode of transportation.

"I see. Would you inform her I would like to speak with her at her convenience?"

"Sure thing, Spock." McCoy was carefully not asking questions, but his bright eyes were full as Spock nodded and left.

At the transporter room, Spock stood to one side, watching the efficient form of Chief Rand and her new assistant. Noticing that his presence made the young man nervous, Spock turned his back partially toward them. He caught the murmured "Surprise inspection?" and hoped his wait would not be long.

The all-clear signal came from the planet below, and the first shimmering wave dispersed. Dr. Chapel was one of the six who hurried from the platform. She picked up a small bag, glanced up at the wall clock, and was moving to the door when he stepped to her side.

"Dr. Chapel," he began.

She stopped, startled. "Oh, Spock! Excuse me, I didn't see you there. I'm afraid I'm late for duty and..." A wondering, pleased look flashed over her face.

"I will not delay you then, but I would like to speak to you soon about our...relationship during this five-year mission."

Her face eased into a neutral smile. "I have good news for you. I finally did something about those emotions I've inflicted on you for years. You won't have to worry anymore that I'll embarrass you."

"I do not understand," Spock said, stepping

aside so that they could walk together toward sickbay.

Christine hesitated, then said, "I rejoined the *Enterprise* because I was certain you wouldn't be here since you weren't on active duty. I didn't want to put either of us through anything like those years of the last mission. Then, when you came aboard, I found myself slipping back into the old patterns. I knew I had to do something. So yesterday when we docked at Starbase 7, I went to the mental resources clinic for the Eilerts'n treatment. My...affection for you is safely locked in the hypno-conditioning." She looked up at him expectantly, a smile on her face, but with no trace of deeper affection in her eyes.

"I..." For a moment, he teetered on the edge of speechlessness. Then he turned toward her firmly, stopping in the middle of an intersection of corridors. "You could not have had the entire process. It is illegal to remove the impulse in a situation such as this without a six-month test period. Surely you were given a release key phrase to eradicate the conditioning and unblock the emotions?"

"Of course. I was fascinated by the technique! I'd studied it briefly last year, but to actually see and participate! Dr. Cron says he sees no problem applying for a permanent excise when the waiting period is over. Apparently it isn't nearly as hard to block hopeless passions as it is to counter, say, death of a friend or severe trauma." She moved briskly down the hall again.

Spock followed, his long stride allowing him to catch up. "Doctor...Christine, I find this situation ironic in the extreme. I had come to ask if you wished to join me in an emotional...a romantic relationship."

Christine giggled. Spock turned his head away sharply, and she composed herself hastily, saying as he looked back, "Well, it is funny!"

"Possibly the situation does have its humorous aspects," Spock said stiffly. She grinned at him. "However, as you have the key phrase..."

"You think I...you want me to unkey?" she asked in amazement as they paused at the sickbay door. "Spock, I paid 500 credits for this not 24 hours ago. I may not be able to feel what I felt for you before, but nothing is wrong with my memory. I remember I gave myself a lot of grief over you. And I hurt you, too; I know I did. I didn't make this decision lightly, you know," she said, frowning. When I went back to medical school, I vowed to put that useless, stupid heartache behind me. For two years I tried to straighten up my life, and I thought I had it all worked out, but when you came back aboard, I found myself excited at even the thought of you. Then, in sickbay, when you were hurt by your contact with V'ger, all the feelings came rushing back. It only took the shakedown to show me it was going to be a long five years stuck on the same treadmill. I can't--couldn't take it. So, at the first opportunity, I took care of the problem. I want control of my own life now. I'm not going to gush out purple passion. My head is clear, and it will stay that way. I'm sorry, Spock." She turned and the door opened for her.

She was gone. Spock's shoulders slowly straightened, but his head was bent and his face rigidly composed as he turned to leave. As he did so, the door opened again and Dr. McCoy came out.

"Oh, Spock! Christine just came in," he said, gesturing behind him.

"We spoke," Spock replied, looking through the door as it slid shut.

"Um," the doctor said, stopping. "Something wrong, Spock?"

Spock opened his mouth for his usual denial, and then remembered something. Turning, he said, "I have a problem I would like to discuss with you, Doctor."

McCoy swallowed his seeming surprise. "If we can do it over breakfast, I'd appreciate it, though." Spock nodded and they walked to the officers' mess quickly, in silence. After they had made their choices and taken their food and drink to an isolated table, McCoy took up his steaming coffee cup and looked Spock over carefully.

"Y'know, Spock, I never thought this day would come!"

Spock took a careful sip of his 'ta and cradled the warm cup in his hands, studying it for a moment. Then his dark eyes focused on McCoy. "Leonard, there are many ways I am changing. Will you help me, as a friend?"

McCoy's cup rattled as it hit the saucer. Instinctively, Spock looked away from the exposed emotion on the doctor's face, but promptly brought his eyes back to the man's face.

"Spock?" McCoy asked, tentatively, wonderingly. Then he picked up his sandwich with a smile. "As a friend, Spock, I'll help any way I can."

"It is about Dr. Chapel. Christine. This morning, I asked her..." McCoy leaned forward. "I was prepared to offer her..."

"Yourself?"

"Yes, a relationship."

"Ah."

"You knew?"

"Knew what?" the doctor asked, confused.

"She went yesterday for the Eilerts'n treatment. She has had her affection for me blocked. She will not use the response key to return them. She was adamant."

The expression on McCoy's face was classic. "Oh, shit," he said, under his breath.

"I do not know how to proceed."

"Well, that's clear enough. Find somebody else," the doctor offered. "A Vulcan wife?"

"No. Not now. I have changed in ways that might not be acceptable to a Vulcan woman. I have

considered carefully. Christine is the one I wish to know as mate--as wife."

"You're sure it isn't just because she's familiar? Good old Christine and all that?" McCoy's face was firm as he asked.

"McCoy, when I was...when you...when my pon farr was upon me, after she knew of my wife but still brought me the news that we were headed for Vulcan...for a moment then, in spite of the bond I had with another, I wished it could have been she. But the bond was there, and afterward, T'Pring severed the bond and the pain left no room for feeling for another. I am...drawn to Christine." Spock looked up. "I am quite sure of this. It was one of the reasons I left the *Enterprise* at the end of our last mission. I believed my destiny lay elsewhere."

McCoy sighed and continued eating. Spock followed his example. There was silence between them for several minutes.

"Well," the doctor said finally, "you've got to get her to release the block then."

"I do not know how."

"It should be easy enough. The Eilerts'n is an adaptation of a Vulcan technique, after all. Maybe there's a flaw in the process? A way to reverse it?"

"You know there is not. Her doctor was Cron. His work with phobias and irrational behavior is known galaxy-wide. His work would not be careless. Only the proper response key, or a meld..."

"And a mind meld without her consent is illegal."

"Affirmative." Spock found the idea morally unacceptable. And wondered if he regretted his ethics. He could not define the brief wisp of emotion that touched him briefly as he rejected the thought of such a short-cut solution to his dilemma.

"Nothing left but to convince her to release it."

Spock was bewildered. "I do not know how," he repeated.

McCoy rubbed his hand across his face. "Just...hum. Courting is so individualistic. I suggest you look into her background. There may be ethnic traditions you can use somehow. You'll have to discover what attracts her--what will change her mind." He thought carefully. "You'll have to have a social life of some sort based on hers. Be visible. Talk to her. It doesn't matter about what. Provide what she wants, create some sort of interaction. Get her curious. And keep her from forming attachments to other men. If you can."

Spock finished his drink and stacked his dishes precisely. "I understand the tactics. I do not know, however..."

"What you don't know, Spock, is Christine." Both men stood up.

"Yet." Spock spoke firmly. "Thank you..."

Leonard." He turned and left McCoy staring at his retreating back.

It was not difficult to get most of the information he wished. The personnel records were open to him, but they were not particularly enlightening. Christine Chapel had grown up in the Canadian Federation and had attended good schools, but not the best. She had worked as nurse, then as a bio-research assistant before returning to school to begin training as an MD. There she had met Dr. Roger Corby, and a year later she had left mid-program to join Star Fleet. After three years on the *Enterprise*, she had returned to school, had received her MD degree, and had been reassigned to the *Enterprise*. Almost thirty-four, her birthday was more than a month away. Perhaps a gift... Spock mused.

As for building a social life around Christine's... Spock tabbed the duty schedules to the screen in his room. Like most of the crew, Christine Chapel held more than one position, as much to prevent personnel burn-out as to provide all the services needed for a crew of over 400. One's barber could be a helmsman, and one's laundry could be processed by a Ph.D.

Christine was listed on duty 25 hours a week as physician, five hours a week as life guard at the pool, and three hours a week as instructor in emergency first-aid classes. The possibilities for social interaction seemed best in connection with her position as life guard, but Spock regarded the news with dismay. All officers and all crewmembers passed a swimming class before they were assigned to one of the heavy cruisers, and Spock had learned to swim at the Academy, but it had been years since he had voluntarily swum.

If that was what was needed, however...

Tabbing over to the medical roster, Spock noted Christine's office hours and break periods. He calculated the times she would be in the corridors, and where. It would be easy to discover the mess she ate in. Next, floor plans for her quarters, the pool, sickbay, and the engineering clinic appeared at his touch. Spock studied them briefly. When he left for the bridge, his plans were made.

Lean, muscled, and dark from exposure to Vulcan's native suns, Spock stood beside the olympic-size pool that had been added with the refurbishing of the *Enterprise*. Simulated sunlight fell from the ceiling, dancing over the artificially bright blue water. The tangle of green vegetation along one wall was actually on the other side of a plexi wall and in the botany department next door. Doing double duty as a pool-side decoration, it did nothing to eliminate Spock's impression of an extremely alien environment.

Only a few crewmembers were lounging on the decks in the warm, humid room. One person swam to the side of the pool and looked at Spock curiously. The others ignored him. He felt exposed, although he was wearing regulation trunks and had a towel draped over one shoulder. Reluctantly he hung the towel on the rack provided and turned to the water. His shoulders were scarred like those of an ancient warrior from the A'tst, the trial of pain-with-

truth, but he did not feel war-like. He felt cold and uncertain. He had arrived early. Christine must assume he came only to swim. His determination was to create some illusion of chance in each of his carefully calculated meetings. It was twenty minutes until she came on duty. With a smooth dive he entered the water, oriented himself, and began swimming laps.

Seated at the end of the pool on the guard platform, a young crewman checked the monitor beside him. It was a relief when he saw his replacement climbing up. Because of electronic monitoring equipment, a life guard primarily reprimanded those who abused safety regulations, and provided first-aid if the computer gave the alert. It was an undemanding job.

"Ready for breakfast, Paul?" Christine asked as she checked the monitor and settled into the chair he vacated with a flourish.

"I'm ready for any excitement. Right now, even breakfast comes in that category."

"Dull shift?" she asked, tilting her head to study the handful of people below.

"Yeah. And I thought this job would have glamor and girls! Look at that! Two Tellarites sunbathing, five people in uniform chatting and dabbling their toes, and three swimmers, one of 'em a Vulcan going back and forth with the most uninspired regularity."

Christine craned her neck, looked, shook her head and settled back in the webbing. "I'll guard them with my life," she promised with a wink. The crewman laughed and swung down gracefully. Christine watched him with appreciation, then turned back to survey the water. The Vulcan doing laps had passed her station.

Hum. Yes, it is Spock, she noted. She watched him casually, thinking how dark he looked in the water. But when he pulled himself out of the water, her attention was at the other end of the pool, where they were finally getting together the team for the water polo practice. She didn't see him walk the length of the pool, gather up his towel, and leave.

"All right, Spock, what is it?" asked Jim Kirk with a touch of asperity in his voice.

"Captain?" inquired Spock, turning. The door of the bridge swished shut behind them and almost immediately they exited into a corridor.

Kirk gestured widely. "All this. What is it? Why, for the third time this week, are we going for coffee for me, and that funny-looking yellow stuff for you, on deck six? There are facilities closer. Even I, who still get turned around with this new design, know that."

"If you studied the plans I provided for you, Jim, you would not find yourself lost quite as often as you seem to..."

"I don't get 'lost,' Spock! It's just that I sometimes find myself...er, somewhere else. The new lifts are faster than the old ones, and the new num-bering for decks..."

"I understand. However, as you also expressed an interest in meeting more of the crew informally, I thought to 'kill two birds with one stone,' as the doctor would say, and familiarize you with the floor plan of this deck, while spending our break with crewmembers of this area."

"Any reason why I can't get acquainted with crew closer to the bridge?" Kirk asked.

"No, sir," said Spock carefully. "However..."

Kirk turned on him, pouncing. "Ha! You haven't called me 'sir' since the shakedown, Spock! You've got something up your sleeve! Out with it!"

"Jim, you appear to get a great deal of satisfaction out of catching me in an apparent anomaly. I assure you..."

"Ha," said the captain again as they entered the door to the coffee lounge. "You're changing the subject."

Spock gave him a glance from under a raised eyebrow and silently picked out his beverage from the new woodgrain and chrome vendor unit. Kirk grinned at him. "Spock, I begin to see a pattern here. What're you up to?"

"Up to?" inquired Spock, his face calm. He still played the 'Vulcan among illogical humans' to the hilt upon occasion. Kirk enjoyed it and knew that, for Spock, too, it was only a game now. Spock surrendered and said calmly, "I am striving to provide a maximum exposure of my presence to Dr. Chapel in an effort to rekindle her affection for me, which she recently had suppressed with psychic-conditioning."

Kirk choked on his coffee magnificently.

Spock watched calmly as his captain recovered himself. With a pained glance, Kirk finally said, "Once more?"

"I believe I made myself quite clear."

"Yes, but WHY?" demanded Kirk.

"Because I wish to explore those facets of interpersonal relationships which have been previously closed to me."

Kirk waved the obvious away with a swift gesture. "With 285 women on board this ship, you finally decide you want one who doesn't want you."

"It does appear perverse," Spock noted. Kirk snorted, his eyes warmly mocking his friend.

"Which explains why I'm drinking my coffee a mile away from the bridge. Perfectly."

"Actually, Jim, I believe the distance is only approximately .17 miles, an actual distance of..." He stopped as Kirk held up a warding hand and drank deeply from his cup. "I have determined," Spock went on, eliminating the statistics willingly, "that

a specific program was needed to influence Dr. Chapel. Are you familiar with the Eilerts'n block?" At Jim's tentative nod he continued, "Dr. Cron could not create a total block against me. As a superior officer, I am in a position to give orders that, for the benefit of the service, must be obeyed. Using a computer simulation of the block pattern that must have been constructed to allow this interaction, I have determined that she is vulnerable to me most when our interchanges occur in a professional capacity. I have designed a schedule giving maximum exposure of two persons within the frame of their respective spheres of duty. At this particular time of day there is a 72% possibility that she will take her break on this level at this time, with..."

"Bingo." Kirk interrupted him as the door slid open to admit Christine Chapel. Kirk looked at Spock with exaggerated respect. Spock looked lightly surprised. "I knew it," Kirk added as the woman joined several male friends in one corner of the room. "You, using logic and scientific method to attract a member of the opposite sex. You realize it's according to the established stereotype of Vulcans. Think of the image..." Kirk interrupted himself with an obvious effort to change the course of his monologue. "Is it working?" he asked.

"I do not at this time have significant feedback to determine that," Spock said mildly.

"Ah," said Kirk.

"With a theoretical project limitation of 190 days, the program has advanced only thirteen days. I have an extensive outline of probable actions to explore."

"I see," said Kirk, almost numbly, and as though he didn't really 'see,' but didn't want to fall into the intricacies of Spock's jargon. "Why don't you just ask her out. Often. That'll get you feedback!"

"As soon," said Spock, "as I have finished compiling a leisure profile and can determine which activities are most likely to elicit a favorable response."

Kirk looked at Spock in doubtful admiration, but before he could speak again a duty chime echoed softly, and he jerked his attention back to his ship. "Darn it, Spock, time to get back and I didn't even mingle with the crew!"

"True. But they have had the opportunity to see you. And it was personally productive. Christine glanced our way twice. We have reinforced the connection between myself and duty."

"Sometime when we don't have to get back to business, you might explain the entire campaign to me," Kirk said dryly as they left.

"Of course. Your assistance and advice could prove vital should specific conditions arise within your reputed area of expertise."

"Green apples!" mumbled Kirk. At Spock's curious look, he added, "Never mind," and headed for the door.

A week later, Spock managed to be in the locker room at the same time as Christine. The invention of privacy screens had eliminated sex-differentiated restrooms and locker rooms. The scent of persons of both sexes and several races mingled together to produce a unique aroma, for the same locker room served the pool, the ball court, and the gymnastic area, and was often fairly full. Christine did not seem surprised to see Spock there, but looked at him curiously when he fell into step with her as she turned to leave. She let him speak first.

"Dr. Chapel, I notice you have signed up to attend the lecture and demonstration of the Camshan sed therapy. I plan on attending also. Perhaps we could go together?"

"Well," she said with hesitation, "I can't see the point of it. I mean, I'd find it a bit awkward, wouldn't you?"

"Wouldn't I find what awkward?" he asked with darkly serious attention.

"Wouldn't you find it awkward to cope with the way I've acted in the past? Really, Spock, I don't want to remind either of us of that."

"That is the past. You are aware that my philosophy has changed since then. You, too, have become a different person. I believe we can interact naturally. The past should not affect a normal interaction between two officers."

"But, Spock, I would find it awkward!"

"I see." With a tight nod, he abruptly turned and moved away.

"Spock?" Christine called, moving up to him, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be--" She paused, her face showing concern and some discomfiture. "--Well, rude. I'll meet you there, and perhaps we can have a cup of tea afterward."

Spock studied her a moment, then nodded. "Thank you. Until then." He turned away, but remained very much aware that Christine continued to stare after him a moment before she continued to her quarters, still unsettled.

Spock went to sickbay and Dr. McCoy's office. The greying head of the doctor was visible for a moment in the clinic, and Spock went there. McCoy was discharging an ensign who had a sprained finger and an embarrassed look on his face. "And don't do it again!" was McCoy's parting shot. He turned to Spock and his expression changed into a smile. "Well, did it work?"

"Yes," Spock replied, with a doubting and uncertain voice.

"I thought it would. Christine is one of those people who doesn't like hurting feelings. Doesn't like to be unfriendly. Been on the other side too many times, I think."

"I am uncertain about the technique. Obligatory socialization--ditv--is not what I wish to foster."

"It's not like you'll make a habit out of it, Spock. It won't work often, so make the most of the

evening, such as it will be. I can't think of anything less romantic than watching the Camshan pack each other in sand."

"We have tea scheduled afterward."

McCoy's bright grin switched on. "That should be interesting!"

It was not interesting. Christine had sat beside him, drank her tea, and excused herself promptly. Spock was left considering carefully his next step. He currently had no use for her professional services. He swam every day she had duty. He passed her many times in the corridors. So far, she showed no signs of responding. It was time for new tactics.

Forty-eight hours later, Spock approached Christine's quarters at a time when he knew that she would be preparing to go to sleep. It was a deliberate invasion of her personal time and space. He was not wearing his uniform. Instead, a grey tunic with a tiny tracing of red embroidery, worn over regulation pants, replaced it. The change was designed to be noticed, the contrast between his previous method and dress deliberate.

An uncertain Christine opened the door as he presented himself, and he was somewhat reluctantly invited inside. He stood easily at the door as it closed behind him, looking carefully at the few decorative hangings on the wall. There was no other sign of individuality in the room. He had expected to see more evidence of her personal taste.

Wordlessly, Christine offered him the desk chair and he sat down. "I have come to ask if you would help me. I wish to have an emotional relationship with you. To do this, I must arrange to have you change your mind about using the release word. I would like your advice on how to proceed."

She stared at him, her mouth open slightly in amazement. Recovering, she frowned, then shook her head. "Spock, what can I say? I don't want... Spock, this isn't logical!" She chose a chair at a neutrally safe distance from him and sat.

"On the contrary, it is quite logical. Only you know what would influence you. It will save both time and effort if you will suggest the best way for me to attract you to me."

"Logic, Spock? That magic word, even now?" Fortunately, it seemed to amuse her.

"Christine," he deliberately enunciated her name clearly and softly, "in this instance there is no reason why logic and emotion cannot be blended. I must use both. Other methods are closed to me."

"And what other methods have you considered?" she asked, a touch of scorn in her voice.

He took the question as a serious one. "Physical compliance against your will was of course not considered, nor was the use of pheromones, as there is a restrictive clause against artificial chemical methods of influencing a member of the opposite sex in the Federal statutes. Besides, I wished for more than a sexual attraction between us." He noticed

the shock and unbelief that flooded her face. "Mind touch without your consent would also be illegal." Her eyes opened wider. "I considered the traditional courting rituals in the Anglo-Am culture which birthed you. However, candy, flowers, and gifts seemed--inappropriate. I did not wish to purchase your affection, nor did I think that they would sway you at this point in our relationship. My inability to socialize in standard human patterns is a hindrance. I do not dance, act, drink, or gossip, and these are the current favored forms of interaction among the human members of the crew. A handicap, in this instance."

"Oh," Her response was deliberately conversational, a sound curiously devoid of inflection. He studied her face carefully.

"How should I proceed, then?" he inquired calmly.

Her blue eyes focused on him briefly, then searched for corners away from his intense face. The silence grew.

"I am quite sincere," he informed her. "Perhaps I should make you more aware of the qualities which attract me to you."

She shifted in her chair, as though interested in spite of herself, and Spock was encouraged to continue.

"Physically, you have many features Vulcans find desirable. High cheekbones, a tall, slim build. You also have human attributes I find personally attractive. Light hair. Full breasts. I have been aware of this for quite some time. Since you came into my room at the height of my pon farr. Since you lay full length beneath me on Platonius."

Christine blushed, but her eyes still looked anywhere but at the calm man in grey who sat across from her.

"You disguise your abilities somewhat, but you are more than intellectually adequate. Although your emotions are irrevocably entangled in your consciousness, you once handled a totally unfamiliar occurrence of a shared consciousness under adverse conditions quite well. Socially," he continued, "Vulcan and Earth do not compare, but Vulcans value merchants and trades, both of which I notice are also part of your family background."

He paused, and forced eye contact between them before he would continue. "I value most your strength of character and kindness. These are the qualities that sent you to take charge of your life and remove your affection for me--and they are the qualities that most attract me."

There was another long stretch of silence as she took her eyes away from him again.

"What qualities, then, do you wish me to display?" Spock asked, picking up his monologue again. "How am I to act to please you, that you might be attracted to me as I am to you? I know I was once physically attractive to you. Your affection for me was blocked, but not your memory. My person is...at your disposal."

She did not speak.

"I know it was not only a physical attraction on your part. You once said...my honesty... attracted you. You looked beneath my pseudo-Vulcan control and saw what I could not see until recently--that I do have feelings, that they are part of what I am. I want to share them with you, who knew the truth of myself before I did." He stood up. "I bring you my honesty and feelings. Christine--love me again."

"Do you love me, then?" Christine asked intently, still avoiding his eyes.

"I cannot honestly say, Christine. I do not know that I have experienced real love. I have nothing to compare to my feelings now."

Her eyes met his at last. "Then it still wouldn't work, would it, Spock? The entire reason I got the Eilerts'n block is that there's no future in a one-sided relationship. I don't want any more waiting, Spock! It's not enough to love, to want. A relationship has to have a future, too, or it will end, and people will get hurt. I won't be hurt again!"

He stood. "Christine, I cannot command love from myself, any more than previously you could draw it from me. I do not know much of love from my own experience. I know that love develops, that it is part of a process as well as an emotion, a feeling. Love is complex. I want you to show me what your love is, all aspects of love, that I may find it within myself, and give it back again."

"Your timing is wrong, Spock," she said, standing also. "I lose too much if it doesn't work out. Emotionally, I can't handle it. I had another shot at romance at med school. He wanted me to quit the Fleet to join him in private practice. It fell apart, but I didn't. I decided--no more. I don't have faith in love anymore."

Spock looked at her intently, an indefinable surprise fleeting through his mind. He took an involuntary step forward, his hand half-out as if to touch her arm. "You have not had love, either!" The revelation caught and animated him. "Christine, I thought all humans knew about love, that they possessed an integral, intuitive knowledge of it. I had thought of love as a unit, but it is a combination, sometimes incomplete! What is offered and what is returned is never identical? Christine, did no one ever return love as you gave it? You always gave, but never received back full measure. Roger Corby--did he value his student as you valued the teacher? He did not marry you and take you to Exo III, but postponed it. Did he love you? Did the lover you had in med school love you, that he wished to separate you from your chosen career?"

Caught in revelation, his eyes on her face as she struggled with her own realizations, Spock turned from her quickly, trying to compose himself. He turned back again a quick moment later. "I see that I have also asked you to give more than I offered in return. Please accept my apologies." He turned again and left, his face becoming automatically immobile as he hid behind a Vulcan mask for the short journey to his own quarters.

In the dark quiet of his own room, he sat on the edge of his bed in meditation posture to think through aspects of the concept of love he had not

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In the dark quiet of his own room, he sat on the edge of his bed in meditation posture to think through aspects of the concept of love he had not



considered before. Was love always unbalanced, never equally shared? Sacrifices could apparently both build and destroy love. He found himself considering his parents. What of love did they share? Had his father asked unequal sacrifice of his mother? His parents had a deep relationship, but could it be called love? Was love a totally human concept? And was love what he wanted?

He began to assemble his thoughts, unsure that he could come to a conclusion, even after intense introspection. It was several seconds before he noticed his door panel flashing.

"Who?" he asked, his hand on the com panel.

"Me. Christine."

His hand slapped the open button and he was halfway to the door even as it opened. She stepped inside, then stopped.

Their eyes touched, moved away, uncertain. She swallowed, absently reaching up to brush her brown hair back, as though trying to consider words before speaking them. The words that may have seemed available in the corridor had apparently stayed there.

"Spock," she began, "the release key. I chose --not a word, but an action. Something I knew would never occur accidentally." She blushed, but looked him straight in the eye. "A kiss. On my left breast. Your kiss."

His face was solemn for a moment, then a half smile twitched his lips. He moved forward with one quick step, but she put a hand out to stop him as his hands came up to her.

"Are you sure?" she asked. Her fingers, although not actually touching his arm, held him still as well as a vise might. "Have you considered everything?"

"It is sometimes not possible to consider everything. I have made my decision. I think you have made yours." He shifted to look at her, moving infinitesimally closer. "I can give you back your block later. If you want it."

Her acceptance was reflected clearly in her face, and her hand fell back to her side. Gravely, without changing expression, he unfastened the catch at the shoulder of her uniform. An entire side seam gave way and he gently pulled the tunic from her arms and dropped it onto the deck behind her. A slight expression of dismay touched his eyes as he considered her underclothing.

"Those full breasts you were mentioning are a little too full to leave free," Christine said dryly. A twist of one satiny strap showed the tab hook, but she made no movement to pull it. His strong bronze fingers took hold firmly, pulled, and drew the garment off slowly. Her breasts fell free. In a smooth swift movement his arms were around her, supporting her back and head as he bent. She arched sharply as she felt his warm mouth, her nipple pushed hard against his closed teeth, his lips pulling. An endless four seconds later, he drew away, supporting her still, searching her eyes for a sign of her acceptance.

Christine clutched a fold at the back of his soft shirt for balance and gazed back blankly as, internally, her mind adjusted itself. Her breath went out suddenly; her chest heaved as she took in new air. "Oh my God," she whispered. Her eyes, ice blue, focused on him. "Spock?"

He was looking at her with lids half shut, his own eyes coal black in the dim room, his features composed, almost stern.

"Spock?" she asked, a quaver in her voice.

"Christine." His voice rumbled in response. Spock felt Christine's muscles spasm clear up to her diaphragm as the psychic block disintegrated. Although the rest of his face did not alter, a flash of knowledge and sweet sinister decision burned in his eyes. Swift hands, sure now, pulled pants and panties down. She stepped out of them, turned, and with eager fingers began to remove his clothing. As his regulation black shorts fell away, his erection grew, fanned by a touch of her warm breath as she froze, half kneeling, seemingly fascinated by the green and bronze marbling spiraling the length of his penis. His hands touched, slid, and stopped, holding her tight, then pulled her gently toward the high bed. Skin to bare skin they lay, finally, but unmoving. She twisted to regain eye contact and he looked across at her.

"Vulcans are...different," he said in a controlled voice. "We should talk--I should explain..."

Christine interrupted. "A doctor interning at Sha'port has access to all sorts of educational materials. If it's been published about Vulcan sexuality, I've read it. Twice." Her face was inches from his chin, a poor angle. "But it's not your time? Pon farr? Can you..."

"I am quite able. I have a...hereditary aptitude. And I believe I have thought of a unique application of some recent training..."

"Sex out of pon farr? Are you sure? The tapes say it isn't common. I wouldn't want to...distress you."

"I choose to do so. Do you also choose this?"

"Yes!"

He smiled. "Besides, the tapes are not always correct, I have found." His body was over hers even as he spoke, pressing her into the yielding, warm bed. They twice missed joining, until the fumbling nudging became frustrating and Spock froze until Christine positioned herself. In one smooth, deeper, deeper glide he sank into her, stopping only when he could go no further. Then he remained motionless as the seconds melted into minutes.

With an uncertain sigh, she moved under him. "Spock?" she queried softly.

He trembled within her, then relaxed abruptly, leaning forward to take more of his weight on his arms. "My apologies. The mating instinct of a Vulcan male is to join and remain motionless, often for hours." He paused to bring his lips up to her throat in a feathery kiss. Her arms slid up tight around him for a moment. "With the blood fever, it

would not be biologically expedient to have a thrusting motion to the mating. It might bring injury to the pair. As the **pon farr** is communicated to the female, changes occur. An egg is released and the uterus prepared for a possible child. Some sensitivity is lost in the reproductive system. As Vulcans at times do mate outside the cycle, despite the reduced fertility, we are aware of the method with a rocking motion..." he stopped speaking in surprise as he felt strong muscles clench his penis, "a motion which I believe should apply in this situation," he finished, with a thrust of his hips.

"Ummmm...humph!" she laughed into his dry neck.

He stopped, and asked, "May I inquire--am I doing it incorrectly? What amused you?" He felt her smile on his neck.

"It was you--explaining--in such detail, explaining! And it was only that you were being so--erudite! And so warm inside me!" She moved her head back to smile at him. "And so educational! That bit about the males remaining motionless while mating wasn't in the tapes I've seen! Do the women also remain motionless during the **pon farr**?"

"No one has ever mentioned it to me. I doubt that the males are in any shape to notice," he replied.

Christine arched, a warm thrill of laughter smothered against his hair. "Oh, Spock--" she began, then caught her breath as another wave of laughter overcame her. Spock tensed slightly, wondering again if his performance was amusing, then forced himself to relax. He was sharply caught up in the fascinating feel of her laughter. It rippled through her skin into his, settling him into bright childhood memories of what it felt like to laugh. She was gasping slightly, and he took his weight onto his knees and elbows, drawing away to allow her to breathe. A deep breath or two and she was recovered. Hands spread wide, she cupped them over his buttocks and pulled him firmly into her. His head came down again. It was brief, but as passionate and as poignant as a thousand human kisses, and she responded eagerly. She brought her hands up, fingers sinking deep into the muscles of his back as her mouth reached for his. It was a savage, open-mouthed kiss over his slightly parted lips. He returned the pressure firmly until she broke away to breathe, then thrust with his hips. Words were suddenly nothing as they began moving together, caught up in sensations and the smooth give and take of a human mating rhythm.

When, minutes later, Christine peaked with seeking hips and a small cry, he stopped, trembling inside her for a fraction of a second. In a warm tangle they relaxed, bodies separate now but close as they eased onto their sides. Calming, Christine put her hand up to Spock's shoulder. "Did you...?" she began to ask, concerned. "I wasn't sure..."

"My release came with yours. The experience was...quite satisfactory." His face showed a trace of genuine appreciation.

"I didn't feel you ejaculate," she explained, her worried eyes still scanning the peaceful face beside her.

"You feel male ejaculations?" he asked, Vulcan curiosity lighting his expression for a moment.

"Not exactly. Not always," she amended. "But usually, in a human mating, there is--more dampness. Afterward." She gestured to her midsection, temporarily avoiding the medical terms that could have been precise, but scarcely romantic.

Spock's long brown fingers slipped between her legs and a single forefinger reached deep. He brought it up to eye-level, with an emerald-green drop of gel clinging to it. "Desert creatures don't waste water. A **pon farr** would dehydrate us to the point of death if our bodies, already fever-hot, had to provide the moisture for repeated matings such as humans know."

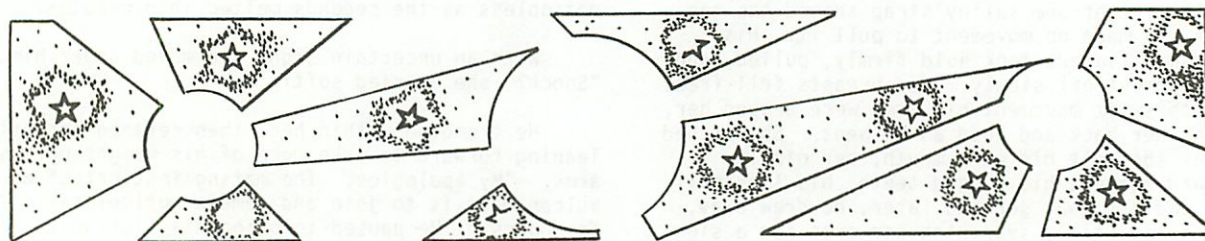
With a nod her hand came up to close around his finger, and the gel melted between their hands. She smiled. "You'll have a lot of things to explain to me."

"And you also will explain those things I do not know. But...we will sleep now. You have duty in 4.3 hours."

"As late as that?" Christine raised her head to check, then let it fall to the pillow sheepishly. If Spock said so, then of course it was so. But... "Logical as that might sound, I don't feel much like sleep."

Spock regarded her for a moment, then placed a finger to her forehead. "I do not want to interfere with your rest."

"Oh, I'm sure you will!" She lifted a droll eye to him. Beneath dark and lowered lids his eyes kindled and glowed. A smile touched his lips, and he lost it against the firm moistness of her mouth.*



The Waiting Game

I

Do I want his return?

Time.

Always time:

"When you're older..."

"Next harvest..."

The time spent

In waiting and watching and dreams,
Dreaming of glory and places and people,
Of all of the best life could offer to me.

Too

Much

Time.

All that time

Now it's gone

All the years,

And the days and the months and the hours.

Spent for what?

For a princess?

(To love me? Not yet!)

For the fight for the right?

(But who's wrong?)

Who's the villain, the enemy?

Leave me alone!

Can't you see I won't fight?

It takes time!

Just be patient, my father,

For the passage of one more short

Time.

Once,

Long ago,

The brother-unasked-for,

The friend who was better than promise or oath,

Walked in my destined path,

Took my pain and my glory;

And the heart of my princess,

He stole.

What should I do if he came again...

Now?

Soon?

Never?

II

At first, I counted the days.
You would come back
Soon, tomorrow, tonight, next week:
I would see you in a short time.
You would come back.

And then I counted the weeks,
The months;
Perhaps even...
It might be years
But you would come back.

I never learned your age
And know my own too well.
By even the most generous of estimates
(I never listen to odds anymore)
At this time tomorrow I'll be older than you were
When I lost you.

At first, it comforted me when they said,
"Well, he's still in stasis...probably."
"Well, we'll find him, good as new."
"I promise."

At first, it comforted me and
I would dream of waking you--
As I saw you go--
With a kiss,
With love and sorrow in your eyes,
With a pride and determination that
Defied all of fate and destiny and
Made the choice your own.

But you are gone.
You have been gone.
You will still be gone
In another day...
And I will be too old to dream.

Love, I need you.
If you can hear me,
I want you.

Come:
Teach me to dream again;
Teach me to love as only you
Have taught me, will touch me.
My heart has waited--
Beyond the enticements of others;
My heart is waiting;
It will wait
Always...
Even after tomorrow.

III

Anxious,
I cry to the stars my grief:
You are gone to a place I cannot find.

Hoping,
I stay with the ones that you loved,
Watching, waiting and guarding my charge.

Faithful,
I work to the day you return:
You must come back.

Oh, my friend,
My strength is wasted but in your service,
My life would be dimmed but I sense your flame,
My feelings mourn within my heart:
I cannot go home without you.

Come back, soon.
Come back, soon.

IV

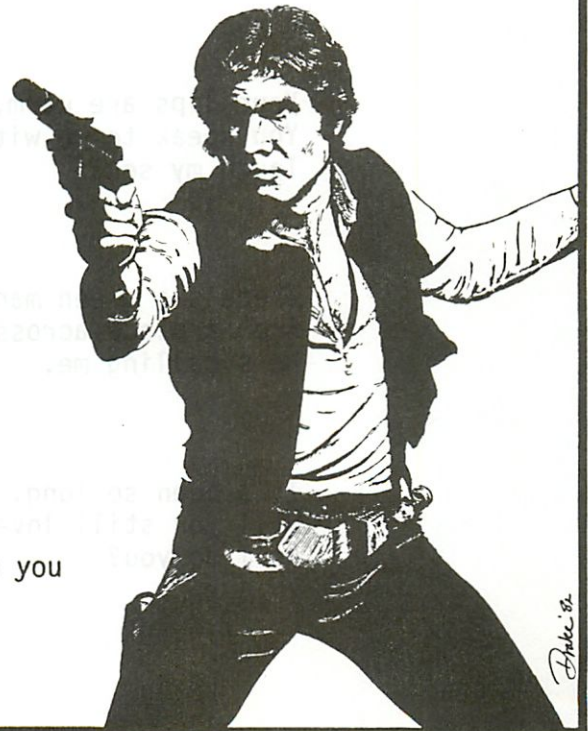
Everyone avoids staring at her.
They don't mind glaring at me.
So, I give them a show.
Morose, sorrowing, apologetic,
But not drunk, not yet,
Not while I've got to fly,
To find you.

When are you coming back,
Hero?
I've got a fist of my own,
Hero!

I want you
Alive and on your feet,
Because I'm going
To knock you off them.

I tried.
Don't you understand:
I tried to help you!
But I had my people...
My people.

For you
And the bright you carried with you
I gambled my city,
My wealth...
And my children,
Brothers, sisters,



Lovers, even enemies.
Such small enemies they were
In comparison to yours,
The blight that followed you to us.

And still I tried;
Because she loved you,
Because your friend loved you,
Because you and I were friends
Once.
No more.

We went back,
Your friend and I, and he cried, too,
For my loss.

I could forgive the
City.
I don't care about the
Mine.

You'd better come back,
Hero!

They even killed the children.

V

Trapped.

At the last, I changed my mind.
I tried to escape.
Is this destiny?

Here.
Cold.

Your lips are warm, love.
You speak to me with eyes that
Touch my soul.

Now.
Helpless.

There's a green man watching
From a place across the stars.
He's calling me.

Today.
Empty.

It's been so long.
Will you still love me
As I do you?

Tomorrow?

Jean L. Stevenson

Come the Revolution

I should have worn crimson, or perhaps
royal purple--
it would have confounded them.
A jury of my peers--well, yes, because if I am
guilty
of the accused crime, then they are as well.

'All rise.'

Seven of them, good military men all, and
the Republic's Counsel, who looks at me as if he
wishes
I weren't dressed, and my counsel, who slews himself
aside
as if he's afraid my fate is contagious.

'The case of the government versus Leia Skywalker-
Organa,
on the charge of high treason against the Republic
of Peoples.
This court is now in session.'

My counsel does not understand that I am the last.

The last thing my father--stepfather, fosterfather--
said to me was, 'Leia, watch your enemies.'
I was young and idealistic--cocky, as Han used to
say--
and he was harder. But he kissed me on the
forehead,
hands on my arms--I carried the bruises for weeks--
and told me earnestly, "You know what your enemies
want.
You'll trust your allies. And it's then
they'll backstab you. Come the revolution,
revolutionaries are expendable."

I didn't understand then. I do now.

Han knew, I think. As soon as we--hah!--they set up
the new government, he split.
He tried to get me to come as well, but I--I was
the Princess, Leia Skywalker-Organa, symbol of the
revolution,
too proud, too arrogant, too damn cocky
to listen to reason.

Mothma was the first. Heart attack, they said.
Dodonna had an accident in battle. Willard
likewise.

Lando--Mother, I should have seen that coming!
and Kayka very nearly did not get Rieekan out in
time.

Luke they tried to use, but he's not near so simple
as some make out.

He would have stayed--he'd be on trial now, if I
hadn't sent him off to warn Han.
Those of Imperial status or blood--ours and theirs
alike--

were given a twenty-one-gun salute.
Somewhere about the midriff, I should say.
That is, those who didn't see it coming aforesomes
and
were still around. Smart man, Veers.

Which, of course, leaves me.

'The most dangerous of them all,'
says the young man in dress-greys,
the Republic's Counsel, so young, so intense, so
handsome,
who stalks past me like a dog
past a quail he's forbidden to touch.

Moff Tarkin would have split himself laughing.

'Has the prisoner anything to say in her own
defense?'

What defense? If all you good men accuse me, dare I
defend myself? Should I ask you when we made it a
crime
to criticize the government? Or to indulge in the
luxury
of free speech?

'Gentlemen, I congratulate you. You have shown
admirable speed
in becoming exactly like the government we just
overthrew.
As well as remarkable dispatch in overcoming--
obstacles.'

Hmmm--looks like the one on the far right may have
apoplexy--
and I certainly hope so.

It would sound like something out of a holoshow
if Luke and Han actually made it back here to rescue
me.

I hope they don't try. It's my only comfort now,
to think of them safe.

A firing squad? How--quaint. They'd enjoy it,
if I refused a blindfold and went down screaming.
I am a Skywalker by blood, an Organa by training.
If I do nothing else in my life, I will at least
die proud.

Father, was this how it felt for you?

If I close my eyes, and put my head back against
this
post, I can ignore it all, I can dream that out of
the setting sun I see a ship--

I can hear the Falcon's engines,
it almost seems real...

Deborah June Laymon

THE HEART OF DARKNESS

JOYCE YASNER

Luke would come to him. It was an incredible idea, but the Emperor had foreseen it. Why? he wondered. Why would Luke come? Because he is drawn to the dark side. Because he wants to be like you. Vader shook his head involuntarily in denial. No, Luke didn't want to be like him. If anything, he wanted to be like Luke. He recoiled from the idea, but it refused to go away. He wanted to be like Luke: young and beautiful and free.

Free. If he gave Luke to the Emperor, Luke would never be free again. We can plot together, he thought, plot how to get rid of the Emperor. I'll have someone to plot with. But he knew that was untrue. If Luke turned to the dark side, he wouldn't want to plot with anyone. He would want the power for himself. Luke would make his own plots to get rid of the Emperor--and to get rid of him too. That was the way of the dark side. He would be alone forever.

The shuttle landed on Endor, settling on the platform cut in the forest. It was the only horizontal thing in a vertical world. The pilot let down the landing ramp and Vader unbuckled his seat harness and went forward to see Endor for the first time.

It was an incredibly vital world. The Force hung heavily in the air, insinuating itself into him. It reminded him of the green heads of grass that, left to their own devices, pushed their way up through the pavement; with slow, mindless persistence they pushed, and the pavement crumbled. The Force sent its green shoots into him, looking for cracks.

He was, apparently, to meet with Luke much sooner than he had anticipated. The commander of the outpost had a rebel in custody, a young man who had surrendered himself. Cautiously, he pushed out with his Force sense and the air vibrated and he knew Luke was near. There was a sympathetic vibration in the Force.

He ordered the rebel brought up and strode across the gantry to meet him. He was amazed at the change in Luke, and only half listened to the report of the commander to whom Luke had surrendered. Luke was indeed powerful, more powerful than he had

anticipated, but perhaps the Emperor had foreseen this too. He hoped he had. He had no confidence in his ability to cope with Luke.

He accepted Luke's lightsaber. "Leave us," he commanded the officer. "Conduct your search of the area and bring his companions to me."

"Yes, my lord." The commander bowed and left him alone with Luke.

"The Emperor's been expecting you," he said.

"I know, Father," Luke said.

"So, you have accepted the truth." He heard the triumph in his voice, but it sounded hollow to him.

"I have accepted the truth that you were once Anakin Skywalker, my father."

He was shocked. "That name no longer has any meaning for me."

"It is the name of your true self. You've only forgotten. I know there is good in you. The Emperor hasn't driven it from you fully. That was why you couldn't destroy me. That's why you won't bring me to your Emperor now."

Luke stood with his back toward him, looking out over the forest of Endor. He didn't know what to say. It was one thing to have doubts yourself, to whisper them to yourself at night before you slept. It was another thing to have someone else verbalize them for you. Once out, once said, there was no putting them back, no denying them.

He looked down and found he was holding Luke's lightsaber. He turned it over in his hands and ignited it and held the beam quite close to Luke, to threaten him with it, to hold him off. "I see you have constructed a new lightsaber," he said. "Your skills are complete." He extinguished the blade. "Indeed, you are powerful, as the Emperor has foreseen." Powerful and dangerous. He clung to the idea that Luke was dangerous.

"Come with me," Luke said.

"Obi-wan once thought as you do. You do not know the power of the dark side." The power to burn people, as the Emperor burned him. It transcended the burning Kenobi had done. That had been a burning that had come to him because Obi-wan had bested him in a fight. It had been a simple, pure burning, a burning of hot steam, from lost footing, from a missed block and a bad stance. The burning the Emperor did was a turning of the life force against him. It was the void come to shrivel his soul. He looked at Luke. "I must obey my master," he said.

"Why?" In two strides Luke was on him, near, gazing into his face. Luke's manacled hands rested on his forearm. He thought, for a moment, that Luke could actually see him. "Why?" Luke demanded.

He pulled away, but Luke hung on.

"Search your feelings, Father. You can't do this."

"Where would you have me go?" he cried. He heard the pain in his voice, and his knees gave out. "Where?"

"Into the forest," Luke whispered. "Now." Luke stood over him, gazing around, looking for enemies, for his men. He wondered how he came to be on his knees and realized he had collapsed. There was no point in fighting anymore. The truth was out now, and there was no putting it back. Luke extended his manacled hands. "I am your prisoner."

It would not do for Lord Vader to be found on his knees, but he did not know if he had the strength to get up again. "Come with me, Father." Luke got him up by the simple exigency of crossing the gantry. He could not bear to be separated from his son and followed him.

They took the elevator down to the forest floor. There the commander of the base was waiting and it was necessary to construct a convincing lie.

"This rebel will take me to Skywalker," he said.

"Shall I send a squad with you, my lord?"

"No. I will deal with him myself."

"As you wish."

Luke led him off into the trees. He was afraid to look back, afraid that if he saw the gantry again he would go back. It was very dark among the trees, and Luke went quickly, turning this way and that among the boles. Within a few hundred feet, the landing platform was gone and he was lost. He went on, following Luke in the Force. Only in the Force was Luke palpable. In the darkness, he was just another shape.

Finally, Luke stopped, and they stood together in the deep blackness of the woods.

"Aren't we going any farther?" he asked.

"We're lost," Luke said.

"Lost?" He looked up and stumbled backward, almost falling over in his anxiety to see the stars.

"You can see them much better lying on your back," Luke said, and threw himself down at the base of a tree.

He stood indecisively for a moment, then sank down beside Luke in the mulch.

"It's like this all over the planet," Luke said. "The trees are hundreds of feet high."

"You can't even see the Death Star," he whispered.

"Something to thank the trees for," Luke said.

"The Emperor will be wondering what's become of me," he said.

"You're looking for Skywalker," Luke said. "That's what you told them at the landing platform."

"For Anakin."

"For Anakin," Luke agreed. "We'll wait here for dawn."

"Your friends will be here in the morning to blow up the shield generator."

Luke sat up. "How did you--"

"I felt you on the shuttle, with your friends."

"Yes." Luke knew. Luke had felt him too.

"They will not succeed. The Emperor has set a trap for them."

"You told him." Luke's tone was accusatory.

"No. I went to tell the Emperor you had landed on Endor so that I might meet you. When I told him that a rebel force had penetrated the shield, he said, 'I know.'"

"We were sold out."

"No. The information he gave your spies was accurate. The code you used to penetrate the shield was valid, only old. I think that I was part of the trap too. I don't think he wanted me to meet you. He ordered me to remain on the Executor and he was very angry when I came to tell him you were here. He said that you would come to me. He said that your compassion for me would be your undoing." Luke was a shape in the darkness. "Is that what you feel for me, compassion?"

"You are my father. I came from you."

Came from him, from his love for Luke's mother when they had lain together in the darkness. His loins were dry now. He had not wanted a woman in many years. The Emperor was above such things, and he revered his master. But there was also the fact that what women he had lain with since Luke's mother left had wanted him only because he was powerful or because it amused them to lie with a monster. They did not make love, but coupled mechanically, almost painfully. These were ritual assertions of his manhood, the posturings of the male, empty and meaningless.

The real power lay in the Emperor's fingertips, in tempting the burning. With the Emperor's fire, his balls were a tight knot against his groin, shriveled and small. He did not want women then, he wanted only to be allowed to serve his master.

Blind with fear, he reached out in the darkness and touched Luke's hands. They were chained. He had forgotten that Luke's hands were chained, and he was ashamed, but Luke caught his hand before he could pull it away and held it a moment before letting him go again.

"You wouldn't happen to have the key to these things, would you?" Luke asked.

"No, but I can open them with the Force." He sat up and moved to sit across from Luke. It was like working a puzzle box, trying to trigger the locking code of the binders in the proper sequence. He lost himself in the problem, chasing the electrons through the circuitry, looking for the pathways. "There, that's got it," he said with satisfaction, and the binders fell away.

"Thank you," Luke said.

He smiled beneath his mask, then stopped himself, realizing it was silly to be smiling when Luke couldn't see, but he was filled with pleasure. "You're welcome," he said in turn. That was the proper response.

"We'll have to meet my friends in the morning, warn them about the Emperor's little surprise."

"They'll kill us," he said.

"No, they won't. I won't let them."

"They'll think you've betrayed them, lying around with Darth Vader in the woods in the middle of the night."

Luke laughed. "I'll tell them how it is. Leia will believe me."

Leia, the fanatical little princess from Alderaan. Well, he had a better chance with her than with her Corellian friend. For a moment he actually believed that Luke was capable of stopping them, that Luke could do anything. He would wait to see what Luke could do.

Luke yawned and stretched beside him, settling more comfortably against the tree, close to sleep.

"I haven't slept since the Emperor came aboard the *Death Star*," Vader said, realizing it for the first time. "I don't sleep much when the Emperor is present."

"I shouldn't think sleeping would be too safe with him around."

"No." The Emperor was an oppressive presence in the Force, and there were, sometimes, nightmares, nightmares of the void. "I don't think he ever sleeps. He's like a great eye, staring at you in the darkness."

Luke shuddered. "It's nice here, though. You can feel the Force flow."

"Yes. There is much of the Force here."

"You don't sound too happy about it."

"It--it works its way into me, sliding, pushing, looking for cracks." Now that he had stopped, he was tired. He had not slept in thirty-six hours, running, like a mad thing, on sheer nervous energy. "I've never done anything like this before," he said. "Running off into the woods. What am I, a truant boy, to run off into the woods? I don't know what I'll do next. I don't trust myself."

"You think too much," Luke said.

"Think too much?" Luke was teasing him.

"Don't think. Just let things happen."

"I am," he said. "But I don't have to like it."

"Oh, go to sleep, Father. It's too late to be rational."

Too late. Yes, it certainly was that. Too late. He picked out a star near a branch overhead and promised himself to watch it until he could tell if it had moved. That would put him to sleep faster than anything.

A sharp blow to the heel brought him awake instantly. Han Solo, dressed in camouflage clothes, stood at a safe distance, his weapon trained on him. Luke was covered by another man.

"Now don't get nervous," Solo said. "Just fork over the lightsaber. Keep the business end pointed toward you."

Beyond Solo, rebel commandos faced them in a tight semi-circle, weapons ready. He unhooked his lightsaber with his left hand and passed it to Solo. Luke's weapon was a comfortable weight in his surcoat pocket.

"Okay. Get up nice and slow."

He got carefully to his feet, keeping his hands away from his body.

"Start talking, Luke, and you better make this good, kid."

"He's come away with me," Luke said. "He's my father."

Solo looked at Vader, then Luke. "Vader's your father?"

"Yes," Luke said.

"That's nuts," Solo proclaimed.

"It's true," Luke said.

"What the hell were you two doing here in the woods?"

"The Emperor has set a trap for you," Vader said. "You will never succeed in blowing up the shield generator."

"Oh, no? Well, I'm certainly gonna succeed in blowing you up. They're gonna be picking pieces of your smelly hide out of the trees for years."

"It's true, Han," Luke said. "The Emperor knows we're here."

"Because Pops, here, told him," Solo said.

"No. It is true that I felt Luke on the shuttle when you arrived. I went to tell the Emperor he was here. The Emperor is very interested in Luke's powers. But when I told the Emperor your group had landed here, he said, 'I know.'"

"What else does he know?" Solo asked.

"Of your fleet massing near Sullust, the attack you plan. The **Death Star** is operational."

"Terrific. You're a real source of cheer."

"Can you afford to disbelieve me?" he asked.

"No, I can't afford to disbelieve you," Solo said, "but that ain't gonna necessarily keep you alive, now is it?" He leveled his blaster. "Can you block a blaster bolt at point-blank range? I think I'm gonna find out."

"Han, don't." Luke stepped between them.

"Why the hell not?" Solo demanded.

"Because there's more to this than you know. It involves Leia. It involves Leia and Vader."

"You keep Leia out of this," Solo said. Solo was angry.

"Where is she?" Luke asked.

"She's with the others. She's waiting at the shield generator."

Vader touched Luke's thoughts, looking for the connection between himself and Leia Organa, and it was there. It was painfully, horribly there. "No," he whispered to himself. "That's impossible." He had tortured Leia. "It can't be true."

"Leia is your sister," he said to Luke.

"No!" Solo screamed. Fortunately for Vader, Luke was in the way. Solo crashed into Luke, sending him reeling to the ground. The blaster discharged, deafening them all. Luke sprang on top of Solo and wrestled his weapon away from him.

"Enough. That's enough. If you fire your weapon again--if any of you fire your weapons--you'll have the Imperials down on us. We've got a job to do. We've got to take out the shield or the fleet will be trapped."

Solo rolled away from Luke and got to his feet. "He's not coming with us."

"No. We'll need help from the Ewoks, reinforcements. My father and I will go back to the village and tell Chief Chirpa what's happened. We'll need Threepio to interpret. You'd better keep Artoo with you, in case there's trouble with the computers."

"I don't trust you, kid. I can't afford to trust you."

"Send us back with a guard, then," Luke said.

"Cilla, go forward. Tell Mr. Fancy Pants Droid to get back here with Wicket. I'm going back to the Ewok village with Luke and Vader. Stoller, Maden, Hayward, you're coming with me. I'll need you to guard 'em. Cilla, get moving."

"Yes, sir."

"The rest of you men catch up with Princess Leia and wait there until I get back with the furballs. If Vader here is telling the truth, we're gonna catch the Imperials catching us."

Cilla and the remaining rebels faded into the woods. Vader stood without protest while Stoller bound his hands behind his back. Luke was tied as well. Then they sat down to wait. Cilla returned within an hour with Luke's droid Threepio and the Ewok Wicket.

"Oh, my," the droid said. "Master Luke, what have you done?"

Wicket took one look at Vader, leapt back, growling, and leveled his spear. Vader stared at the creature, torn between laughter and outrage. The Ewok looked like nothing so much as a child's stuffed toy, but there was nothing humorous about being threatened with a spear.

"All right," Solo said. "Threepio, call off Wicket. Let's get this party on the road."

The droid spoke to the Ewok, and the creature, sparing Vader one last, belligerent glance, led them off into the woods.

Luke strode confidently beside him, unconcerned about his bound hands or the rebels' doubts about his loyalty. The Ewok knew the woods well, and went surprisingly quickly for a creature so small.

"Are they native to this moon?" Vader asked Luke, gesturing with his chin toward Wicket.

"Yeah. They caught Han and me in a trap. That's how we found them. They're not as cute as they look, though. They were going to eat Han."

"Cannibals?" He didn't know what else to call people who ate sapient.

Luke shrugged. "I don't know if they eat each other, but they thought Threepio was a god. When Han threatened him, they were going to eat him. And there were stormtrooper helmets in the village huts."

So much for judging by appearances, Vader thought.

After two hours' travel through the woods, he was hot and tired. The ground was uneven, falling away in places to ravines, and there were dead trees everywhere. These he was left to negotiate as best he might without the use of his hands, and his legs were a mass of bruises. Finally, Solo called a halt. Stoller came up behind him and untied his hands.

"We climb from here," Solo said.

Wicket led them up the side of a tree. A ledge had been chipped in the living wood, a ledge scarcely wide enough for him to stand with both feet together. It spiraled up and around and he went keeping his gaze fixed on Luke's back, resisting a maddening urge to look down. When they had reached a certain height in one tree, Wicket stepped across a log bridge to a second. They made five such transitions before arriving at what seemed to be the main road, a log bridge spanning the trees a hundred feet above the forest floor.

Solo halted them long enough for Stoller to retie their hands.

The trees were full of Ewoks. Lookouts took note of their passage and signaled ahead on horn trumpets. They arrived at the village proper with a crowd of the creatures surrounding them.

"The Ewok with the staff and skull helmet is Logray," Luke whispered. "He's the tribe's medicine man. The small gray one beside him is Chirpa, the chief."

His Ewok escort parted and Logray strode up to them. He nodded a greeting to Solo, then glanced appraisingly at Vader. "Hehayna," the Ewok said.

Growling menacingly, the villagers descended on him in a group. He kicked one and sent him flying before the rest crowded in, savagely jabbing the hafts of their spears into the backs of his knees, hauling him down by his clothes. He struggled, but there were too many of them, and at last they were lying in a heap. One particularly ferocious one sat on his chest, the tip of his knife slid under the edge of his throat plate. They bound his feet.

"Hey, what's goin' on?" Solo demanded.

Logray addressed Threepio and the droid translated. "Logray asks if this is the great enemy you told us of."

"It sure is, Goldenrod."

"Then, as is the custom of the tribe, all must share in the victory."

"Meaning what?" Solo asked.

Threepio looked to Logray. "He is to be eaten," the droid said.

"The hell I am!" Vader bellowed. "Luke, call them off, or I'll use the Force."

"Threepio," Luke said, "tell Logray that Lord Vader can't be eaten. He is my father."

"Master Luke!" The droid sounded shocked.

"Threepio," Luke said.

The droid translated.

The Ewoks muttered among themselves. At a signal from Logray, his captors relaxed their vigilance enough for him to sit up. The ferocious Ewok sitting on his chest slid off and disappeared into the crowd.

Logray was angry. He came up to Solo and delivered a long harangue, gesturing with his staff, pointing at Vader. Solo looked helplessly to Threepio for an explanation.

"You have brought confusion to the Ewoks," Threepio said.

"Me?" Solo was indignant. "I'm not the bad guy in this crowd. Ask him what kind of a father he is. He cut off his own son's hand. Go on, ask him." Solo waved at Vader.

Threepio translated. Logray scowled and came up to Vader. They were on eye level now, the Ewok and he. Logray stared him in the face and spoke and waited for Luke's droid to translate.

"We were told you are our great enemy," Threepio said. "We were told you turned Han Solo to ice. We were told you caused his mate great pain. We were told you cut off Luke Skywalker's hand. Are these things true?"

"Yes."

"Then why are you here? Why have you come among us?"

"Luke is my son," he said. It was the only thing he could say, the only thing that made sense.

Logray extended his hand and held it before Vader's face. "I do not know who you are," Logray said, the droid translating simultaneously as the Ewok spoke. "I do not know what manner of creature you are." He sat quite still while the Ewok touched his metal face and the plate that protected his chest. He could feel Logray looking at him, knew that the Ewok saw him. His mask was no protection. Logray looked into his face and saw him and knew him as he couldn't know himself. "Who are you, Darth Vader?" Logray asked.

"I am a man," he said. It was an idea he clung to, although sometimes he didn't believe it. Sometimes he thought he was a droid. Sometimes he thought he was a monster. 'Darth Vader' was the name he had chosen to call the person who had replaced Anakin Skywalker, Anakin who had been burned up in the pits of Tasheen by Obi-wan Kenobi. Anakin was hideous; Anakin was the slave of a box he wore around his neck. Darth Vader was magnificent in his power. He was untouched and untouchable, separate and alone.

Logray did not believe in Darth Vader. The Ewok's hand was firm and sure. He could feel it through the leather of his tunic as the Ewok felt his arms. His arms were, in part, flesh; some small parts of him could still feel with human feelings. He yelped in pain as Logray pinched the soft flesh of his underarm.

"Matoomtoom," Logray said.

"Huh?" Solo asked.

"He doesn't know who he is," Logray said through Threepio. "He is matoomtoom."

"What's that mean?" Solo looked at Threepio.



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"It means Lord Vader is unbalanced," the droid said.

Unbalanced. Vader frowned. The word was fraught with meanings.

"Well, I didn't need any furball to tell me that," Solo declared.

"Matoomtoom is a spirit word, General Solo," Threepio said. "'Unbalanced' doesn't quite cover all the meanings. Logray does not mean that Lord Vader is insane, exactly."

"Oh, no?"

"He means, if I understand the term properly, and I have only a textbook knowledge of the language, sir, that Lord Vader is not in harmony with the greater reality of life, the Spiritual All, if you take my meaning, sir." Threepio looked at Vader, for good measure.

"The Universe ain't particularly fond of Darth Vader," Solo said.

"Nor he of it," Threepio said. "I'm so glad you understand."

"So?" Solo asked.

"So?" Threepio repeated.

"So what does Logray propose to do about it?"

Vader, looking at Logray, wondered the same thing.

"I haven't the slightest idea," Threepio replied to Solo's question.

"Ask him," Solo said.

"Oh," the droid said, and spoke Ewokese again. Logray replied. "Logray says that Lord Vader must fight the mittegand."

"Who or what is a mittegand?" Solo asked.

"Teebo," Logray said. The fierce Ewok who had sat on Vader's chest came forward. On his head the Ewok wore the preserved head of some animal. It had tusks and a lot of teeth. None of the other Ewoks wore a similar head; the animal seemed to be Teebo's totem.

"The mittegand is a species of wild boar, General Solo," Threepio said.

"Trial by combat, huh?" Solo said. "What does he get to fight this mittegand with?"

Threepio looked confused for a moment, then spoke to Logray. "Nothing," the droid answered.

"Nothing?" Solo looked interested. "He's got to go one on one with a wild boar with nothing?"

"That is the way of the spirit ritual," Threepio said.

Bit Solo, Vader felt, had missed the point. However ferocious Teebo was, the Ewok wouldn't have lived long pitted unarmed against an animal the size

of the one whose head he wore. Whatever battle Teebo had fought, it wasn't the simple physical one Solo imagined. He sensed that neither a spear nor the Force would be enough to conquer the mittegand.

"What if this wild boar thing kills him?" Solo asked.

Threepio translated and Logray shrugged. "He will no longer be part of the tribe."

"I didn't know he was a member of the tribe to begin with," Solo muttered.

"But of course he is, General Solo," Threepio said. "The tribe adopted Master Luke. If Lord Vader is Master Luke's father, then he must be a member of the tribe as well."

Solo scowled at this logic. "Let the mittegand have him. No sweat."

Threepio translated Solo's acquiescence to the spirit ritual.

"Tohana," Logray said, and Vader's Ewok captors cut his bonds and pulled him to his feet. Luke's bonds were cut as well.

Logray led him, Luke, and Threepio into a hut. When they were seated, Logray circled the hut, shaking his staff as if to ward off bad spirits, to make certain that only Luke and Vader would hear of the mittegand ritual. Fixing his attention on Vader, Logray began to tell them the things of the tribe, the things the Ewoks knew.

"Among the Ewoks," Logray said, Threepio translating, "it is said that the spirit of the mittegand comes upon the warrior in battle. With it, he is invincible, powerful and strong. No one can prevail against him. But the mittegand dwells in a world not meant for men, and the man who would be possessed by his spirit and not give it up will be carried off to dwell between the world of the spirit and the world of men, lost to himself and the tribe. This is what has happened to you. You are matoomtoom, neither man nor mittegand. So, you must fight the mittegand to regain possession of your spirit, to send the mittegand back where he dwells, to return yourself to the world of men. We will all help you in this fight, but the battle is mostly yours."

"Shall we summon the spirit of the mittegand? Will you face him in battle?"

"Yes," he said without hesitation.

"I will summon the medicine council." Logray left him alone with Luke.

He sat back to wait. For the first time, he felt he was doing something right. He turned to share his pleasure with Luke, and was unnerved to see that Luke was frightened.

"I don't want you to do this," Luke said. "You don't know what they'll do to you."

"Rid me of Darth Vader, I hope," he said.

"But they're--they're--" Luke struggled for words.

"I hope you aren't going to say they're animals. There's quite enough of that attitude in the Empire."

"No!" Luke protested. "Primitive."

"And close to the Force."

"The trees are close to the Force."

"The trees aren't sapient, Luke."

"But you heard what Logray told Han. The mitteggand is a wild boar. You're not going to have any weapons."

"Perhaps I don't need any weapons," he said. "Luke, I don't remember the last time anyone was concerned about my coming to harm. Most people have wished me worse than dead, and certainly the Emperor would have found the prospect of my being sacrificed to some alien god uproariously funny, but you have to understand that the Ewoks, as primitive as they are, live closer to the Force than we do. They've never gotten away from it, as we have, with our philosophy and logic and technology. They're here, now. They know who they are and what they're about. If they're willing to help me find myself, then I'm going to take them up on it."

"But you can come away with me. Surely you can learn the same thing through meditation."

"That takes years of training and a discipline I never achieved before I became Darth Vader. It's beyond my scope right now, and I don't, personally, have the time to spend training myself."

"Luke, I'm on what your friend Calrissian would call a roll. I'm finally doing the right thing and I won't jeopardize it. Let me do this thing and be happy for me."

"I can't bear the idea that you'll be hurt."

"I won't be. Oh, I don't think this is going to be much fun, but they won't hurt me."

Luke sighed. "All right. If it's what you want."

"It is."

A half an hour went by while Logray assembled the medicine council. The Ewoks came for him in a group.

"You must accompany the medicine council to the Great Tree Mother, place of the spirit ritual," Threepio said. Logray pointed with his staff.

Luke got to his knees to crawl out of the hut first, but Logray pushed him back. "Lo yotay," Logray said.

"Master Luke, you may not come."

Luke sank back on his heels.

He gave Luke back his lightsaber and the spare pack of batteries he carried for his respirator. Luke looked at him for a long moment before sliding the batteries into a pocket.

They must have made a strange procession, he towering over the group of Ewoks, Logray and Threepio leading the procession. The Great Tree Mother was some distance from the village proper.

The way there was barred by a palisade of logs daubed with paint and decorated with arcane symbols. Logray opened the gate, and he was faced with the dizzying prospect of crossing the gap between the perimeter of the village and the Great Tree Mother by means of a loosely strung net. The medicine council, long initiated into the rites held at the Tree, swarmed across the net without a thought for their safety. He didn't share their self-confidence.

"Yub, yub," Logray said, and gestured across the gap.

He thought about levitating across, but that would undoubtedly wind him up in more medicine trouble than he could hope to handle. He might make it on a running broadjump, but he wasn't sure exactly how much abuse the platform on the other side would take, and if he missed, he'd kill himself. Then there was falling into the net face first, covering as much distance as possible, and hauling himself up the far side by brute strength alone.

Logray stood waiting, and he felt himself getting angry at his inability to solve the problem. There had to be some way of getting across; he wasn't expected to kill himself. The net was a test of courage and resolution. Technique didn't matter; neither did dignity. The idea was simply to get across.

"Threepio," he summoned Luke's droid. "Help me off with my armor."

He unclasped his cloak and folded it. Shin guards, groin plate, shoulder guards and gorget followed. The less weight and encumbrances he had the better. He had the droid pull his boots off, then added his surcoat and belt to the pile of clothes.

Logray stood watching him curiously.

He walked to the edge of the gap and studied the net, judging as best he could where, precisely, it went slack. His aim was to land just short of that point. He paced off a few feet back from the net to get a running start.

"Threepio, tell the medicine council to get away from the edge," he ordered. The droid spoke, and the crowd of Ewoks, gathered on the far side of the net, parted.

Twelve feet to cover. He stood for a moment, forcing himself to breathe slowly, to relax. Just do it, he told himself. You've rolled out before. He ran and hurled himself into space, hit along the length of his curved arm, tucked and rolled. The momentum gained from his impact with the net was less than he had hoped for; he'd landed too far toward the center. He came up, clutched desperately at the strands of the net, and hauled himself up the far side.

The members of the medicine council chattered excitedly and thumped him in congratulations, but he

was too shaken to enjoy his triumph. He sat panting while the Ewoks crowded around.

A rope was tossed across to Logray, and Threepio was hauled across the gap. Logray closed the medicine gate, and came across.

A small enclosure barred the way to the Great Tree Mother. Logray gestured him inside.

"This is the ritual food which you must eat," Threepio said as Logray pushed a bowl into his lap. He studied the contents: bits of chopped meat and a white, spongy fungus. "I'm afraid, Lord Vader, that it's drugged," the droid said.

No doubt it was.

The use of mind-altering drugs was not confined to the primitive peoples of the Empire. Some citizens took hallucinogenic substances for recreational purposes. He remembered, with a kind of cold dread, his efforts to use the Force while drunk on nothing more exotic than alcohol. Obi-wan had put him up to it. They'd been bumming around some port or other, and he'd challenged Obi-wan to a drinking bout. They'd gotten drunk, and then Obi-wan had sprung the idea on him.

His efforts proved nothing short of disastrous. Using the Force was simple once you were shown how to do it. The trick was controlling it. He'd nearly killed them with nothing more lethal than a beer pitcher. He'd gotten it off the table easily, but from then on the thing had had its own ideas about where it was going. It'd taken him a few minutes to realize the only thing to do was let go of the damned thing. When he'd stopped shaking, he was stone, cold sober, and had promised himself never to use the Force again while in less than perfect control of his faculties. It was a vow he'd never broken.

Logray was waiting. He pulled his gloves off and set his respirator to push air through his tracheostomy collar. When the mask had depressurized, he took it apart and set it aside.

Logray stared at him. "Kochata," the Ewok said. "Kochata."

"Scars, scars," Threepio echoed.

Vader shrank away, but Logray touched his face anyway. "You have fought many battles," Logray said. "You have borne much pain."

Vader looked away in shame.

He took up a bit of the meat and mushroom mixture with his fingers and put it into his mouth. It had a pleasant, spicy flavor overshadowed by the soiled taste of the mushroom. Now he would not be able to use the Force, but that was all right. Darth Vader had never used the Force well. When the bowl was empty, he sucked his fingers clean.

Logray took the bowl from him and spoke to Threepio. When the droid didn't translate immediately, Logray addressed him again, this time more forcefully. Threepio was nervous.

"Threepio, what did Logray say?"

"He said you must take off your clothes, that you must enter the Womb of the Great Tree Mother naked. I'll explain--"

"Droid," he said. "I am a human being, not a machine."

"Of course, my lord," Threepio said hastily.

"I can be naked if I choose to be."

"Yes, my lord."

And he did want to be naked, to put aside the last trappings of Darth Vader. He even discarded his sensor shirt, effectively cutting himself off from his respirator. The machine had a standard setting on which it would push air into his lungs at a constant rate; it didn't have to be tied into his physiological responses to operate, although it was more efficient if it was. He felt he must cut a bizarre figure, naked but for the box around his neck and his tracheostomy collar, but Logray was oblivious to the humor of his position.

The medicine man led him from the enclosure.

The way to the Great Tree Mother was obscured by smoke. A double row of fires had been built between him and the Tree by the members of the medicine council. He could not see them through the pungent, stinging smoke, but they were there. Their voices rose in chant about him. He turned to Logray, but the Ewok had disappeared.

Fire to purify him. Kenobi had believed in the efficaciousness of fire too. It had destroyed Anakin utterly, leaving Vader to carry on in his stead. He passed through the smoke, his eyes streaming tears.

The Great Tree Mother was a vast old tree, three times as thick around as the average forest specimen. Logray stood before her, dressed in some fantastic bark mantle that made him look like a little tree himself. His face was daubed with blood, or perhaps it was mud, and he wore branches of coniferous needles bound to his arms.

Logray spoke and Threepio translated. "This is the Great Tree Mother from whom all living things spring. From her Womb, Ewoks were born into the world. From her Womb, you will be born into the world of men."

Logray took his hand and drew him to the Tree. "Yub, yub," Logray said, and pointed.

Beyond a barrier of plaited twigs covered with needles and fern was a hole in the Great Tree Mother's side. At Logray's urging, he got down on his knees and ducked his head and shoulders into it. The hole sloped upward at a forty-five degree angle. It was impossible to tell how far back it went. "Yub, yub," Logray said again, and patted his back. The Ewok wanted him to crawl inside.

It was going to be a close fit, and with a sort of sinking horror he realized it was quite probably going to be pitch black inside.

Using his legs and elbows for propulsion, he pushed himself into the Great Tree Mother. He could not imagine what terrors this tunnel held for an

Ewok. He was easily half again the height of any member of the tribe and still, with most of his body in the tunnel, he could sense no end to it. Logray pinched his calves mercilessly and he squirmed farther up the incline. What little light there was from the opening below him was blocked by his body and he could not, given the narrow area, reach more than a few inches ahead of him. The climb was brutal work. He used his elbows and knees, finding purchase where he could in the cramped space. He emerged all at once into the Womb of the Great Tree Mother.

It was, he thought, very much like a cathedral. The ceiling was high, perhaps as much as twelve feet, and a mellow light filtered through the walls, bathing the room in a translucent, red glow. Because it was the proper thing to do, he sat in the meditative pose Obi-wan had taught him, on his heels, his long legs folded under him. The Ewoks made this place, he thought. On their backs and bellies they had lain in the darkness, shaping the Womb out of the wood according to their vision. Physically, the Ewoks were insignificant; they had no technology to speak of. But, spiritually, they were great. Oh, yes. They had vision, and will. They might just win, he thought with a dizzy kind of relief. The rebels, with the help of the Ewoks, might just win.

He had gone with Luke from the gantry because of Luke's vision. It was his vision, the sacred vision he held close to his heart, the one he couldn't say or even think about too often because it was sacred and secret, special, his. He had glimpsed it on another gantry, the gantry on Bespin, the sacred vision of who he was.

He had tried to claim Luke as Vader's child, then. He had said, "Obi-wan never told you what happened to your father," as if Luke's father were Darth Vader, because that's what he had wanted to believe. But Luke had said, "He told me enough. He told me you killed him." Then Vader had felt as if he'd been kicked in the chest or shot because this wasn't as if Anakin had died and he, Vader, had taken his place. This was as if Anakin had been murdered, and the pain of that was unendurable. And so he'd said, "No. I am your father," knowing, in that moment, that he was Anakin, too. But Luke had seen only Darth Vader there and had denied him.

Vader had always thought that Anakin had died because he was too weak, that Darth Vader had taken over because he was stronger. The Emperor had always acted as though Anakin were dead. He had always spoken of Anakin as if he were a different person. "The son of Skywalker," he had said, as if he, Vader, weren't Skywalker.

The Emperor was a great liar, but Obi-wan was a greater one. He had made Vader a culpable part of Anakin's death, as if Vader had had something to do with it when Anakin had gratefully died and let him be instead. Now, here, on the Endor gantry, Luke had accepted him as his father and he was still Darth Vader. They had shared the sacred vision. And he knew Luke's vision was true because the Emperor had spoken of Luke's compassion for him, for him, Darth Vader, not Anakin.

It was horrid. He had wanted to go to Endor to look for Luke. The compulsion was so strong he had defied the Emperor's order to remain on the Executor

in order that he might search for the boy. He had tried to come up with a plausible excuse, of course. He had said that the rebels had landed on Endor, but the Emperor had already known that the rebels would come because he had set that up as part of his great plot to destroy them, and so he had had to say that Luke was there, and he'd said, "My son is with them." "My son." He had said the sacred thing to the Emperor. Oh, yes, he remembered now how the Emperor's eyes had narrowed. The Emperor had known that he and Anakin were one and still he had let him go to Endor, confident that Vader would obey, would bring Luke to his doom. "He will come to me?" he had asked the Emperor, like the great dolt that he was, and the Emperor had smiled.

He was losing it; he was losing all control. His collapse on the Endor gantry had been the culmination of three years' worth of changes in him, changes that he hadn't liked but nevertheless had been unable to control. It had begun with viewing the tape from Leia's cell, that damned tape from the first Death Star in which Luke had announced his identity to anyone listening, little realizing just how important who he was would be to some people, to him--his father--and to the Emperor. After that, none of the things he had done before held any pleasure for him, not chasing the rebels, not fulfilling the Emperor's will. For two years he hadn't given a damn what the rebels did. They could have brought the entire galaxy down around their ears and he wouldn't have cared. All he wanted was Luke.

And now, it turned out, Luke wanted him. After his pursuing Luke for three years, now Luke wanted him. It was frightening. It was as if Luke, through the power of his will, through the power of his vision, would conjure him as who he was. He was to be Anakin Skywalker; Luke would make him Anakin. It was only fair, he supposed, his mouth twisted into a wry little grin. He had tried to conjure Luke. I got what I wanted, didn't I? he thought. I got Luke, but I have to be Anakin to have him. I can't be Darth Vader anymore. Now he was going to find out if he could do it. He was going to find out who he really was, once and for all.

An Ewok stood before him. He had appeared, it seemed, out of thin air. "Yub, yub," the Ewok said and pointed across the chamber. "Yub, yub." The Ewok pointed down. He stared stupidly at the creature. "Yotay." The Ewok gestured for him to come.

He wasn't sure he could move; moving seemed a very complicated process.

"Yotay." The Ewok stamped his foot in irritation and scowled. "Yotay tehana esai." When he still didn't move, the Ewok came around his far side and pushed. He fell over sideways. "Yub, yub," the Ewok said, and pulled at his arm.

"All right. All right," he said. He turned onto his stomach and drew himself across the floor on his forearms. There was a hole in the floor.

"Yotay tehana esai," said the Ewok. The Ewok wanted him to go down the hole.

He swiveled himself around on his rump and put a foot toward the opening.

The Ewok swatted him hard. "Lo ge. Jo, jo." The Ewok shook his head furiously. "Jo hana esai."

The Ewok squatted down and put his head between his legs. "Yo." The Ewok stabbed a finger at him and toward the hole.

Down the hole head first. All right. He would go down the hole head first. What direction did it go in anyway? He'd go down on his back. If the little bastard pinched his feet, he'd get him later. He was half stupid from the mushroom he'd eaten and didn't feel up to doing anything physically demanding, but fortunately the tunnel sloped away at a gradual angle. He controlled the rate of his descent with his hands and feet, emerging in an awkward heap at the bottom.

He turned onto his belly and looked around. If this was the world of men, it was not a nice place. If this was where he was to meet the mittegand, it would go hard with him. He was in a long, low, dimly lit chamber; its corners lay in darkness and in those corners lurked living things--Ewoks, mittegands, he didn't know. It was close, and hot. The ceiling lay, perhaps, four feet above his head; it was too low to stand up. He would have to scutter, crablike, across the floor when the mittegand came.

He knew a bit about wild boars; once, he had thought that it might be amusing to hunt them. Some weighed as much as a small man, one hundred and forty pounds or so; others weighed more than he did, as much as four hundred pounds. They knew their world through their noses and ears; they were smart and mean. They ate anything they could get: vegetation, snakes--even poisonous ones--small animals. They had four tusks; the bottom ones were kept sharp by constant wear against the uppers. They weren't afraid of men.

Something in the darkness grunted. The hackles rose along the back of his neck. He gathered his haunches under him and moved backward until his feet were in contact with the wall. He felt the muscles in his thighs bunch. The animal came out of the darkness on short, powerful legs, its hooves clicking. The ears twitched; the snout quivered, testing the air, seeking him. An indifferent malevolence smoldered in its eyes. He saw in its soul the hot, pink coils of his intestines smoking, his blood in fountain jets.

A black, rank hatred of this thing settled over his heart. It shouldn't eat him; it would not. He had snapped men's necks like sticks; urine had run down the legs of prisoners at the sight of him. He was Vader, master of the dark side of the Force, death-bringer.

The mittegand lowered its head and, squealing, came. He leapt upon its back and at once they were a growling, snapping, rage-filled tangle, boar bristle and straining sinew, ancient battle scars pressed tight. There was a roar, too, pig grunts and kiais, the Force-summoning Jedi shout, and the high-pitched cries of Ewokese warriors, knives high. The mass of them rolled over and about, hot blood ran, and knives flashed. Somehow he came out at the bottom of it, sprawled, the mittegand gone, and then came the hot, wet skin of it, coarse bristles, and its snout hung over his face. He looked out of its eyes, its skin lay over him, and the Ewoks bound it fast.

He was conjured mittegand, death-bringer, master of the dark side of the Force. The Ewoks brought him living things, things that fled in panic before him, leaping, squawking, flapping things that he killed as his due, biting through their necks until his mouth was clogged with fur and feathers and there was no breath or motion but his own. He killed them because he could, because he was stronger, because he despised them for their fear and their weakness. He killed them because there were two kinds of creatures in the world, prey and predator, and he was not prey, oh, no, not he. That's what the Emperor had taught, holding him screaming over the void. That's what Obi-wan had taught him, burning him alive.

He had tried to kill the Emperor once. He had done it for Obi-wan's sake, because he was strong with the Force, because Obi-wan expected it of him. For his audacity, the Emperor had shown him the power of the dark side, the agony and the void, and he had come to see what a fool he was to think he could resist it, that anyone could stand against it. No, it was to be embraced and worshipped, loved with a selfless devotion, for if you gave yourself to the dark side, if you took it into yourself, it could not harm you.

Obi-wan had burned him for knowing that. Obi-wan had wanted him to die. Obi-wan had seen the terrible knowledge in his eyes and tried to destroy him. They were no longer friends. There was nothing between them. Obi-wan was without passion or feeling of any kind. He was an assassin, as efficient as any war droid. Obi-wan did not want to know that the void existed or that Anakin had seen it. It was as if Obi-wan believed that if he obliterated Anakin, the void would not exist.

But what of him? Pain was how you knew the power. That had been the Emperor's first lesson. Nothing else mattered when you knew pain. There was no love or dignity or self-respect, just the void and holding yourself back from it. He would do anything, sacrifice anything, to hold himself back. He did not have the strength to go into the void and live, although he thought that perhaps the Emperor had.

"I did it for you," he had cried, but Obi-wan had struck off his hand and sent him plunging into the pit.

He had almost lost his mind, then. There had been no escape from the pain. He could not even beg for mercy, for the doctors had put the thick penis of the respirator tube down his throat. They had bound him fast and flayed the flesh from his body, made him a monster.

It wasn't fair. He had been able to rationalize his defeat at the Emperor's hands. He hadn't been ready; the Emperor was more skilled. The Emperor had frightened him half to death, showing him the void, but he understood what had happened. He had made a mistake. He was ashamed, but it wasn't unendurable. He was sorry he had disappointed Obi-wan. But these things weren't enough. Obi-wan had wanted him to die, and now he was an outcast, a pariah.

"It's not my fault," he had wept, but it was.



He had gotten very angry. He didn't know what it was about him that was so horrid, but the void still gaped and he would not go into it. Let them try to put him in; let them try. He would sacrifice them to the void in his stead. Through their deaths he would appease the power, hold it off a little while longer.

The Ewoks thrummed "Eee!" low in their throats, the warriors' threat, and came with their spears high. He would kill them too. He had killed their kind before, the ones who had hunted him in the forest with their spears. He would thrust his great tusks into them and let their blood run out. He lowered his head and ran among them, trampling them beneath his hooves, and the Ewoks put their spears into his shoulders. Their spears were very sharp; he only felt them when they came away, like razor cuts. The Ewoks bowled him over to have at his belly and he screamed in terror.

"Ane lo mittegand!" he cried. "Ane lo mittegand! I'm not!"

But the spirits of the dead said otherwise.

Animals and birds, they accused him with open eyes and gaping wounds and heads that hung askew. They poured their blood over him, great gouts of it, until he thought he would drown, and hung their bodies around his neck.

The Ewoks brought him their sons, the ones who had died on the mittegand hunt, poor, desiccated things, their eyes sewn shut, their gaping wounds painted red with clay, and the ones who had fallen from the trees or died of illness.

Last, they brought him a living child, who screamed in terror at the sight of him and struggled to be free. He was to be sacrificed too. His father bowed him over backward, presenting his belly for the mittegand's tusks.

Vader was sick with terror, sick with what he might do. He would have given Luke to the dark side, too, sacrificed him up, and Luke would have been consumed utterly. There would have been nothing left of Luke, or of him, either. There was just so much that could be given before there was nothing left.

The Ewoks stood mute before him, waiting, sharing with him their knowledge of the dark side: the fear and the hatred, the anger and the shame, for all living things were helpless in the face of it. It was the supreme power, the power of death, which he worshipped like a lover.

He was the mittegand. He was. But it was wrong to avenge his pain on others. However much he had suffered, it was wrong. It was wrong and it did no good. That was the worst of it. It did no good.

He wept with shame. He was ashamed he had failed Obi-wan these twenty-five years past. He was ashamed he had not had the courage to die when the Emperor offered him that option. He would not kill anyone, ever again. Not the Ewoks, nor their sons. They were waiting for him to kill their son, and he would not. He shook his head no and backed away.

Again the Ewoks thrummed their threat and came with their spears high. He would not fight them.

He lay on his forearms, his face on the backs of his hands, and took their spears in his shoulders. He was not angry or afraid, just very, very tired.

"Tosh! Tosh!" Logray cried, and pushed the warriors away. He could not even lift his head to look at Logray, but the medicine man cut the skin of the mittegand from him. The Ewoks carried him between them and put him head first down another hole, a dark place where they left him to lie for a while, alone with his grief and his knowledge.

A soft, warm living breath awakened him, a breath and a curious, wet prickling and sunlight in his eyes. Logray breathed over him, and licked his face. It was like being licked by a cat, pleasant but strange. The Ewok leaned over him, cleaning the blood from his face. He brushed his hand over his face to make Logray stop.

"Ane Logray. Ta yo?" the medicine man asked.

He turned onto his stomach and blinked at Logray in the morning light. Behind Logray, the members of the medicine council stood together, watching him. They were filthy and disheveled and as bone-weary as he was by the looks of them. Luke's droid Threepio stood nearby, reluctant to get any closer than necessity demanded to the scruffy Ewoks and Luke's father, but he didn't need Luke's droid to translate. "I am Anakin," he said, trying the name out. He hadn't been Anakin in a while, and it felt strange. "Anakin," he said again, to see if Vader would have anything to say about it. Vader was silent.

"Anakin," Logray said. "Tas meh."

From a skin slung around his neck, Logray squirted milk into a bowl and gave it to him to drink. The milk was warm and rich in fat. He drank it down and licked it from his lips. He extended the bowl, hoping for more, but Logray put the bowl away in his carry pouch.

"Yub, yub," Logray said, and the medicine council formed itself into the same rank that had led to the Great Tree Mother the day before. For a moment he was mortally embarrassed at the prospect of returning to the village naked, but Logray had another destination in mind. With a bob of his head, Logray walked nimbly out on a long branch, then disappeared from view down a rope ladder, going rapidly, hand over hand, toward the forest floor a hundred feet below. Anakin stood on the branch, watching Logray go, terrified and elated at the sensation of being suspended in midair, then he drew a deep breath and swung out into space after the medicine man. He could not descend as rapidly as Logray; he had not spent his life among the trees. It was a long trip down to the forest floor; it grew cooler and greener as they descended.

There was a stream below, wending its way between the trees. The Ewoks piled in, shrieking, kicking up great plumes of water before executing shallow dives and paddling out to the center. He sat on the bank, reluctant to go in. Baths were a perilous procedure for someone dependent on a machine for his breath and the water was freezing cold.

"Anakin, yosho," Logray called. The medicine man stood waist deep in the stream and gestured for him to come in.

He shook his head no.

"Anakin, heha," Logray said.

The medicine council members had left off their swimming and were standing, some chin deep, some up to their chests, in the water, staring at him. There was nothing for it but to go in. He freed the straps that held his respirator to his chest and pulled it off over his head. Holding the box aloft, he waded in. His feet were numb in an instant and the rocks were slippery and sharp.

He approached Logray gingerly, afraid of falling in, but Logray was out of patience with him. When he was close enough, the Ewok grabbed his free arm and tried to make him sit down. He struggled, but Logray would not let go, and he soon lost his balance and sat down hard. He sat, and Logray washed him. The medicine man dipped up handfuls of water and released them over his head, smoothing the water over him. He felt silly, and wished Logray would stop, and then found he was crying again, crying because he didn't know why Logray would want to give him a bath, but happy that he wanted to, or why the Ewoks had gone through such a lot of trouble for him, but grateful that they had.

He caught Logray around the waist and pressed him to his chest. Logray let out a squeak of surprise and glared at him, but he loved Logray then, fiercely, and he had to do something about it or burst. He loved them all, because they had gone out of their way to help him when, by all rights, they should have wanted him dead. They were all wet and they smelled terrible, but he hugged them anyway, the ones who got close enough, and they tickled his ribs. There was some common language in their touching.

They went back to the village. There were no humans awake but Luke, who had not slept all night by the looks of him. Luke looked both horrified and pleased, happy but embarrassed to see him. He smiled tentatively at his son and Luke embraced him, rested his head against his chest. Luke's hair was very soft and blond in the morning light, and it was as if he touched Luke's mother then. Leia took after him, but Luke was his mother in everything but his eyes. They had the same color eyes, Luke and he.

"I think I'm an Ewok," he said. "I feel more like an Ewok than anything else."

Luke grinned. "You're too big to be an Ewok, and you haven't got any fur."

"Still, that's what I am."

Luke laughed and looked uncomfortable, as if he thought that perhaps his father had lost his mind, but Anakin felt saner now than he ever had. He wanted to be an Ewok. It would be a good thing to do. He would ask the rebels if he could stay on Endor.

Logray touched his arm, and pointed away across the clearing. "Anakin, shuf ta. Luke, yotay haba."

Luke looked around for Threepio, for the droid to explain.

"I think the idea is for me to go to sleep," Anakin said. "I'm exhausted."

"Shuf, shuf." Logray pushed them toward a hut.

Anakin awoke in the darkness and for a moment didn't know where he was. He lay under a pile of animal skins on a pallet of branches. The hut was fragrant with their sap and with the smell of wood smoke. Above his head was a circle of stars formed by the circumference of the smoke hole in the roof. He looked at the stars and thought how beautiful they were and wondered why he thought something was missing. A star flashed and fell and then he knew what had happened. There was no **Death Star** and no Emperor. Like a man who had had a sore tooth, he probed the Force for the Emperor, and there was no one there, no pain. He had not realized the Emperor was gone until now. **I'm still alive**, he thought, a snort of hysterical laughter welling out of him. **I outlived him**. He was incredulous.

"Are you all right?" Luke asked in the darkness.

"Yes, I'm fine. I just realized the Emperor's dead."

"For about two days now," Luke said. "He died while you were with the Ewoks."

"You blew up the **Death Star**."

"Not me," Luke said. "The others."

Outside the hut a fire burned. Luke's friends were silhouetted against it. Nearby, roasting slowly on a spit, was the carcass of a mittegand, a wild boar, the mittegand he had killed in the Great Tree Mother. He looked at it and felt a curious communion with the creature. Had he killed it? Had it died by his hand? If he hadn't killed it, then the Ewoks had, in sacrifice, for him. It made him shiver. That mittegand was Vader, part of himself. Two Ewoks took the boar from the roasting pit and carried it to the far side of the fire.

Teebo came across the platform toward the hut he shared with Luke. The Ewok crawled inside and gave him a piece of leather. He looked at the skin, not understanding what it was for until Teebo covered his groin with his hands and gestured toward the leather he held. Anakin wrapped the apron around himself, securing it in place with thongs. Teebo took his hand and led him from the hut.

The rebels didn't know what to make of him. They were rapidly putting two and two together, but they were wonderfully confused and he thought it was funny. At the moment, he felt rather invincible; he had, after all, survived the Emperor, so it was difficult to take any threat the rebels posed quite as seriously as perhaps he should. They could decide to execute him, after all, for war crimes. That would be an ironic end to things.

He sat cross-legged beside Logray while the rebels muttered among themselves. They were getting angry now; the shock had worn off. Logray put a



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hand on Anakin's shoulder, and the tension melted out of him. He had not realized how tense their anger was making him.

Logray shook his staff, stilling the Ewoks instantly. The rebels took a few more moments to come to order. "This is Anakin who has returned to us," Logray said, Threepio translating. "This is Anakin who has fought the mittegand."

Two members of the medicine council put a bundle at Logray's feet. Logray untied it and brought up from its contents a leather hood such as the Ewoks wore. Logray showed the hood to everyone, and then slid it over Anakin's head. Next, there was a necklace of mittegand teeth. They were rather fearsome things, lying in a fan on his chest. Then he was given the head of the mittegand to wear. It was splendid and even more horrific than his necklace of teeth. There was a knife to wear in a sheath, and a spear, and a leather bag on a bandolier. He wondered what was in the bag--fire-making things, a bowl, perhaps, a packet of medicinal herbs.

With a sharp flint knife, Logray carved a piece of meat from the carcass of the mittegand and brought it to him, still hot enough to be steaming, on a fold of bark. Logray held the meat before his mouth, waiting for him to eat of it.

If the boar were Vader, if he were dead, then it was wrong to eat his flesh, wasn't it? It was cannibalism. It was worse than cannibalism. It was a kind of self-abuse. **How can you eat yourself?** he wondered. But what should be done with Vader? Was he to be buried in a hole, as if he had never existed? Would that make what he had been any better? Was it right to try to obliterate him?

No, if Vader were part of him, then let him be part of him forever. Let him take Vader into himself, where he belonged. He belonged in everyone. Vader was his strength and courage; he was what had kept Anakin alive. He took the meat from Logray and ate it, savoring the rich flavor. Whatever he thought of cannibalism, his stomach, at least, knew nothing about it. He was ravenously hungry.

Logray handed him the knife, and indicated the circle of Ewoks and rebels with a sweep of his arm. They were all to eat too; the Ewoks and rebels. He knew the Ewoks would eat the mittegand. He butchered the carcass and gave lumps of the steaming meat to the medicine council. He brought a piece of it to Logray, not knowing the proper etiquette of the feast, but Logray declined. He brought the meat to Luke, who fell to with relish. Luke smiled at him before taking his portion; Luke knew what they were about.

General Solo sat with Leia. The Corellian sat with an arm around Leia's shoulders in a proprietary manner he wasn't too sure he approved of, but he let it go. He hacked off a lump for them, and brought it over.

"General," he said.

Solo stared at him, his features held in a carefully noncommittal mask.

"Won't you join in the feast?" Anakin asked.

Solo shook his head tightly.

He bent to put the meat at Solo's feet, but Leia's hand stopped him. "Here, give it to me. I'll eat it." She found it hard to look at him, but the offer had been made. He let the meat go into her hands.

When he'd given meat to everyone gathered there, Logray accepted the medicine man's portion. There was more food after the mittegand had been eaten, fried cakes and berries and a beery drink he drank with caution, although Luke was working at getting stinking drunk. Luke staggered after him when he found himself unable to keep his eyes open any longer and returned to their hut.

"You haven't told me what happened to you," Luke said. He sat quite close, their knees touching.

"I don't think I'm allowed to," he said.

"No?" Luke asked.

"I went into the Womb of the Great Tree Mother and from there I was born into the world of men."

"You were in a tree?"

"Yes."

"I was in a tree too, once. I found you there."

"Me?"

Luke nodded. "And me."

"That's what was in my tree, too."

"Stay out of trees," Luke advised him with the great and cautious wisdom of the drunk.

They grinned at each other.✱

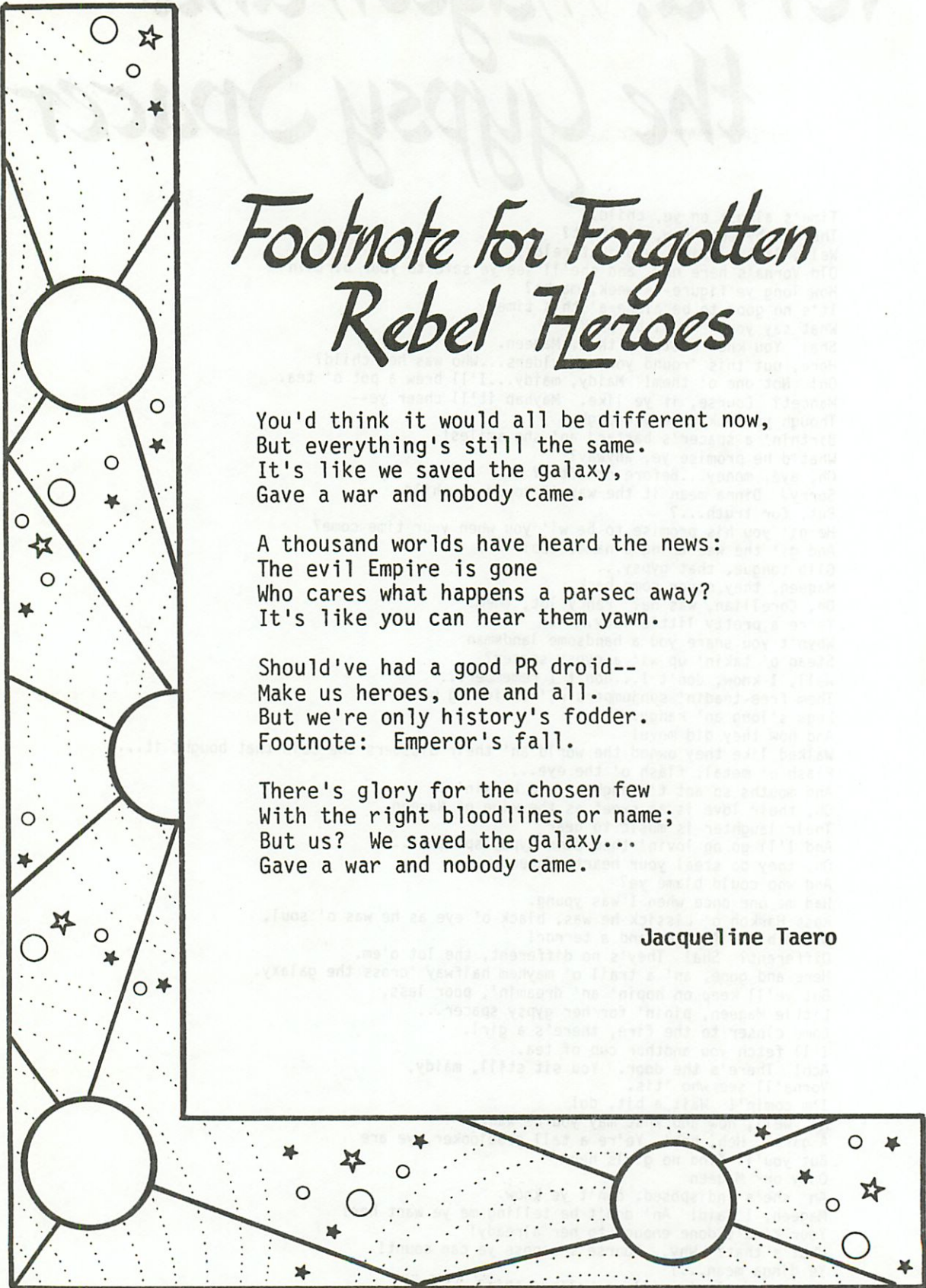


Lybarger '82



Vorna, Mageen and the Gypsy Spacer

Time's almost on ye, child.
That's obvious, now, ain't it?
Well, little Maily, you just relax,
Old Vorna's here now, and she'll see ye safe to your birthin'
How long ye figure--a week, maybe?
It's no good to be alone a' this time.
What say you? He'll be back?
Sha! You know better'n that, Mageen.
Here, put this 'round your shoulders...Who was he, child?
Oh! Not one o' them! Maily, maily...I'll brew a pot o' tea.
Mancet? Course, if ye like. Mayhap it'll cheer ye--
Though ye look cheery enough--
Birthin' a spacer's bastard an' she smiles!
What'd he promise ye, anyway?
Oh, aye, money...Before or after?
Sorry. Dinna mean it the way it sounded, child.
But, for truth...?
He gi' you his promise to be wi' you when your time come?
And gi' the wee thing a name, too?
Glib tongue, that gypsy...
Mageen, they never come back.
Oh, Corellian, was he? Fancy lot, them.
Ye're a pretty little lady.
Whyn't you snare you a handsome landsman
Stead o' takin' up wi' a gypsy spacer?
Well, I know, don't I...don't I remember...
Them free-tradin' sunjumpers wi' their big boots--
Legs s'long an' rangy...
And how they did move!
Walked like they owned the world an' their blasters the coin that bought it...
Flash o' metal, flash o' the eye...
And mouths so apt t' laughter and kissin'...
Oh, their love is as sweet as the wine of Nareen,
Their laughter is music to hear
And I'll go on lovin' them damn gypsy spacers...
Oh, they do steal your heart, Mageen,
And who could blame ye?
Had me one once when I was young.
Ross Harkon o' Lissick he was, black o' eye as he was o' soul,
Bless him! A rogue and a terror!
Different? Sha! They's no different, the lot o'em.
Here and gone, an' a trail o' mayhem halfway 'cross the galaxy.
But ye'll keep on hopin' an' dreamin', poor lass,
Little Mageen, pinin' for her gypsy spacer...
Come closer to the fire, there's a girl.
I'll fetch you another cup of tea.
Ach! There's the door. You sit still, maily,
Vorna'll see who 'tis.
I'm comin'! Wait a bit, do!
Ah, well, now and what may you be wantin'?
A girl? Heh, heh! Ye're a tall goodlooker, ye are
But you'll find no girls here,
Only our Mageen
An' she's indisposed, don't ye know.
Mageen, I said! An' don't be telling me ye want her!
Your kind's done enough to her already!
What's that? Why...Course I s'pose ye can count!
Ye dinna mean...?
Mageen, darlin', will ye believe this?
Well, maybe ye will...
Ah, now, ain't that something? A gypsy, an' a Corellian t'boot!
Live an' learn...



Footnote for Forgotten Rebel Heroes

You'd think it would all be different now,
But everything's still the same.
It's like we saved the galaxy,
Gave a war and nobody came.

A thousand worlds have heard the news:
The evil Empire is gone
Who cares what happens a parsec away?
It's like you can hear them yawn.

Should've had a good PR droid--
Make us heroes, one and all.
But we're only history's fodder.
Footnote: Emperor's fall.

There's glory for the chosen few
With the right bloodlines or name;
But us? We saved the galaxy...
Gave a war and nobody came.

Jacqueline Taero

TWO FACES

SARA CAMPBELL

She crouched in the corner of her hard cell-bunk, arms hugging her knees. Her dark eyes glittered with frustration. She reached up a hand to push back her unruly mass of dark hair, which was damp through with sweat--sweat which had nothing to do with whatever the ambient temperature of the cell might be. She rarely noticed such things.

She ran a shaking hand through her long damp locks. No, the sweat was from fear and fury and killfright.

She knew it might come to a fight for her life, and soon.

"Shit," she said. She hugged her knees again, tightly. Then, "Fuck it all."

That made her feel slightly better.

It was a miserable damn place. The bare-walled box of a cell was lit with a maddening flat, yellow sort of light; the air was filthy with moisture, and smelled like dust and cloying dead roses. It reminded her, miserably, of Dominguez. Dominguez and. . .

. . .and that other place. She shut her eyes. At times it was a physical effort to block that hideous gush of memories. The idiocies, the jumble and chaos, the terrible slaughter (I got you, you son of a bitch!), the mad rush to escape, escape . . . by comparison, the escape from Dominguez with Batty and the others had been calm, simple and straightforward. In. . .in that other place, there had been no choices available.

She shook her head, pushed that horrid fragment back into its dark recess. It had to be that way; she had to go on.

She resumed: The worst part of all this was that she was in it all for her own fault. Of course it was her own fault. She had broken and run off, and right into the energy gate. . .for the same reason she'd run back before and before, the same stupid impulse. The others had known about it. Zhora had laughed--"It'll get you killed some day, you know." Which was really a pointless thing to tell her, because after all. . .

. . .after all, the others had shared such impulses, in their own ways--even Zhora, even Willy Soledad. Even Roy Batty. They'd all known it.

Replicants could never keep secrets from one another.

That thought made her grin sourly. One android should know another.

She felt the compulsion grip her again. It was as though he were calling to her again, demanding yet helpless. She shut her eyes and leaned her forehead against her knees.

She had to get out of here, she had to, and find him; then she would find the others. They were her comrades, her friends and siblings of sorts; but he, he was a part of her, really, the only solid thing she could cling to. She could not leave him behind.

There was no way she could leave him behind.

* * *

Two women: They faced each other over the flat dull metalloid desk. Dust motes danced and swirled in the stark overhead lamplight.

The one female--youthful, strong, dark-eyed, with a tumbled mass of dark hair--stared impassively before her. She wore an ill-fitting uniform of slick grey Fiberoid. The back and one breast were stamped TYRELL CORP. Under cover of the desk, her hands--clenching and unclenching a corner of the uniform tunic.

Her face remained calm. Hers was a face that only said: You can't have me. You can't touch me. Stay away.

The woman opposite her was checking over the cluster of sleek, boxlike machines (sensor devices?) before her in the desk. Then she shuffled several papers together. (Notes?) In the lamplight her face appeared plain and full and graciously set, skin fair and just beginning to sprout lines of character and age; hair a warm blonde shot through with white, pulled back tight, tight over her neat-shaped skull; eyes a sharp steel-blue. A calm, encouraging smile was set on her face: We needn't have any secrets from each other now, need we?

The dark-haired, youthful one watched. Hidden in her lap, her hands clenched together.

The older woman leaned forward then, deliberately, unhurried. Her plain grey-green triacetate suit glowed luxuriantly in the dull light. She wore an ID badge on one flowing lapel, with TYRELL CORP bold across the top. With care, the woman stretched a spare-boned hand out and then a well-manicured finger and then just-like-that touched just a single button on one machine.

Teep.

One red eye unfolded itself and came to life, glowing. Stared directly at the youthful dark-haired woman.

She looked at it impassively.

The steel-blue eyes opposite her watched. The gracious smile tightened. The narrow hand adjusted the staring red eye-thing. Then the woman spoke:

"That was illogical of you."

The young dark-haired one watched her warily.

Another smile. "The way you ran right into our electrical field. Quite uncharacteristic, one might think. You're usually the model of efficiency and practicality."

She bowed her grey-gold head to examine several notes, neatly crossed out a phrase or two, made corrections. Just so.

The dark-haired one watched. In her lap, her hands clenched together. Finally: "I don't know you."

The faded head came up. The steely-blue eyes surveyed her. "Yes, of course you wouldn't." She adjusted something on one of the slim grey cases on the desk; the red eye-thing glinted piercingly. "Please don't move. What is your name?"

The dark-haired one was silent. **Don't tell her! Don't let them have it. . .**

The other woman nodded, unruffled. "Of course. Well, the name you last went under. . ." She consulted one of her papers. "Emma." The smile quirked. "Creative. You chose it, I assume."

No reply.

The eyes watched. The perfect, neat teeth gleamed; the tight-skinned heart-shaped face did not change its expression of neutral pleasantness. "When did you discover that you were a replicant? The Dominguez facility?"

A stiff silence.

"Why did you attempt to break in here?"

The one called Emma stared warily. Then: "You expected it?"

"No. We did not."

A pause.

"You're police?" Emma said.

"No." A smile. "I am. . .well, one of the technicians here."

"Creative work."

"Yes."

Emma grinned. "Bitch."

The interrogator studied Emma's face. Then the steely eyes lowered, glanced at this and that among her panoply of elegant machinery. "How do you feel about animals?"

Emma was silent. For several seconds, there was no sound but the electronic sighs of the desktop sensors. There was the muffled roar of passing spinner traffic outside, then a voice called out distantly in the hallway outside the dim, still office cubicle.

Finally the interrogator laid down her stylus, folded her hands before her on the desk. "This is unsatisfactory."

Emma smiled slightly.

The woman nodded. "You are thinking of your companions."

Emma's smile stopped. She looked into the bright, pinpoint redness of the eye-thing. She unclenched her hands; carefully, she flexed one, then rubbed the palm on her uniform tunic.

Her interrogator watched.

"What did you do with him?" Emma said. Her voice was low.

"He's with us, under observation."

"Bitch," Emma said coolly, almost lightly. "You're lying. You've killed him or something."

"He's completely intact, my word of honor." The steely eyes sought out some set of sensor indicators on one of the units hunched atop the desk. The interrogator took up her stylus. "However. . ." She considered. "However, I regret to tell you that all of your other companions have been eliminated. A police action."

Emma's face was stiff and still.

The sensors must have picked up a multiplicity of useful signals, at that. The interrogator's eyes flicked rapidly over the indicators, and with her stylus she scrawled out notes in a gnomic, hook-like shorthand.

The red eye-thing glared piercingly.

Emma looked away, her face bleak and empty.

The indicators continued to pour forth a rapidfire tattoo of data.

The interrogator's neutrally pleasant face shifted to a slight indication of pleasure, genuine pleasure. "It must have been a shock, discovering that you are actually a replicant," she said, making

glyph-like notes. "Did you actually begin suspecting before you were detained at Dominguez? Or did, perhaps, Roy Batty tell you?" Her voice had grown deliberate, precisely modulated and enunciated. "What was the clue that made you really suspect?"

"I know your voice," Emma said.

The woman seemed to ignore her comment. "You'll be pleased to know that your companions gave the peace officers a great deal of opposition. Why, the break-in here was only a sample of their sheer ingenuity. And they managed to demonstrate amazing initiative, right up to the end."

Emma looked at her numbly.

"It was what we would have expected of them. It was meant to be that way, you see," the woman continued, warmly. "Just as you were meant to leave them. Just as you have left the others behind in the past. It's not failure; you were meant to, you see. That reflex compulsion has saved your life time and again. It was what made you best, my dear."

"Best among what?" Emma said. Her dark eyes looked past her interrogator now, past the red-eyed sensor, an inward stare. "I've been wondering why you and the company figured we were expendable," she said, her voice softening with introspection. "You took so much trouble to train us, to pick us, and you send us out there. Into space. Way past the known frontier. And all for...for Defense. For weapons. For some thing that could save your asses in the Corporate Wars." Her gaze sharpened on her interrogator. "Right?"

The older female smiled warmly. "Excellent intuition. However, we weren't trying to develop the weapon you think we were. We're always looking for new combat models."

"A test," Emma said softly. Repulsion crept across her features. "You mean it was a test on the part of the company. All along."

The woman opposite her beamed. "We certainly didn't expect to see you again, out of all of them. You are more resourceful than even I ever expected."

"It was a product test?"

"And you were originally only a variable!" Inspired and pleased, the woman leaned forward. "How do you feel about animals?"

Emma lowered her face into her hands. "Stop."

"You're in a desert, Emma," the woman said. "All alone. You're walking along on the sand, when all of a sudden you find a tortoise. It's lying on its back. Its belly is baking in the hot sun. It's helpless, Emma. It can't get up. Not without your help."

"Stop!"

The woman went on as though mouthing the words to a ritual. "Someone gives you a calfskin wallet. A child traps a butterfly in a killing jar. You're served a deluxe buffet consisting of raw oysters, cat en brochette, boiled dog stuffed with rice."

Emma's hands hid her face. They had her pinned down. Stuck down. They could read her.

". . .A mother spider builds her web in the mulberry bush. She makes an egg and guards it. She has an orange body, green legs. . ."

(grey, it was grey, all horrid and swift, and a death's-head grin)

". . .One day the egg hatches and a hundred baby spiders come out, and they eat her."

(ate her. . .ate him, ate right through him. . .)

"You're in a field. A meadow. You're running along. You're hunting fieldmouse. The grass is long and sweet and rustles in the wind. You're running because you enjoy running and you know you'll find it. . .the sky is blue and it rained last night, the soil smells of hard rain and new grass. You're on all fours. The soil feels good. You hear a mouse somewhere. . ."

(and she could feel it, the wind in the grass, and she could remember it; her muscles trembled with the memory of it, the running and the joy of the blue sky and the smell of the wet wet earth, just as she remembered Cincinnati in 1952, Tierra del Fuego, Dresden 1938, and the iron smell of rain on the cement, and the urine-stench down in the San Angeles MetroTubes. She remembered Willy, she remembered the thud of a blaster, the horrid jolt of the energy gate's field, the screams of men and women, the wild groaning shriek of the ship's nuclear implosion, her cell on Dominguez. . .)

(. . .she remembered the slow heartbeat in the dark, the chill frozen night, and nothing before it, nothing, always. . .)

. . .oh, god, I'm dying. . .

. . .no. Never. They can't do it to me, I won't let them. . .

. . .and the sharp red eye-thing staring at her, staring, and behind it the matronly prodding smile of the interrogator.

Emma felt a hot flood of shame. She had let them pry it out of her. She had let go.

"I know your voice," Emma whispered.

"And then you find a horse," persisted the woman. Her tones were calm and reasonable. "He's nosing at something behind a bush. Maybe it's good to eat. You go over to investigate."

"God damn you, Mother!" Emma cried. "Where did you put him? Did you kill him?"

"Of course not," the interrogator said smoothly. "He is being put through a battery of behavioral tests. Controlled environment."

"Controlled environment. . ." Emma gave a low, ragged laugh. "Controlled environment, just like us. I've never been sure, though--is he real, or is he synthetic as well?"

"What a prodigy you are," the woman said, with some satisfaction. "Don't you realize what a gift we have given you?"

"I wish I could tear it out of me," Emma whispered. "You and your goddamn voice."

"But it's saved you, time and again. It always will." The woman looked at her; the calm smile curved. "Yes, I have always been with you. I suppose you could say that I am your Voice. At inception, every replicant is fed knowledge, data, selected capabilities." She toyed with her stylus. She leaned back, her expression reminiscent and analytical. "We call it impression. A process that we're still perfecting--very complex, almost an art, really. It began back with Project Brainstorm in the '80s, with animal research and primates. By now it's progressed so far that the old police detector-tests are obsolete, invalidated." The woman smiled. "I'm told that you replicants recall the whole process as images, synapses, but mostly as a voice. . . The Voice. With some, the Voice is a matter of mystery and awe. Almost a religious cult. Isn't that so?"

Emma shook her head. She ran shaking fingers through her long, dark hair. "You abandoned us. And you designed us, you made us. You're the killers; you're the ones the police should shoot." Her voice sank to a bitter, wondering whisper. Somehow she had managed to gather together her calm, her bitter poise, again. "Controlled environment. What a joke. Tell me--just how do you plan to get away with this 'controlled environment' shit, anyway? Before I got back to the frontier--before I got hauled off to Dominguez--I had a message about Tyrell Corporation activities out on the network. How will the company lie its way out of that one?" There was no triumph in her tone, only. . . a tiredness. **Let's face it, they've got it all worked out.** "I would like to know," she said.

Her interrogator gave her an appraising look, then nodded. "Very simple," she said. She adjusted a control here, a control there, on her main sensor machine. "It became apparent, through the network again, that the whole tragic incident was due to a certain crewmember going mad from space-depression and killing off the rest of the crew." The interrogator's steely-blue eyes appraised Emma. "Thus the crewmember's story was a mad fabrication."

"You're the killers," Emma said evenly. "You know that, don't you? How could you have done it to us?"

The other woman looked at Emma, flat blue eyes averted. The oval face creased into an expression that was almost beatific. "But my dear. . . it was for your own good."

* * *



The test was over.

She knew that it was now only a matter of time. Her usefulness was fairly well used-up. They had emptied her out, completed their study, case closed. They had, she thought with a sour snicker, had their way with her.

Now, back in her cell, she crouched in the corner of her bunk again, chin on knees. She was much calmer now--as cold and precise-thinking as she had often wished she could be. Now she could plan.

They'd said the others were dead--Roy Batty, Zhora, Willy, Pris and Leon. That might be true; if it was, then fuck it--she'd still try to make her way. However. . . she gave another sour grin, trying to imagine anyone's attempt to erase Roy Batty from the world. Or. . . **Or Willy**, she thought tenderly. The people in this goddamn place had always cheated her, lied to her, always. Perhaps they had even lied about her comrades being dead.

They're saying I killed my crewmates off? She shuddered. **Grotesque.**

They had lied, there. **But I have killed, to be free.** Free of Dominguez, free of 'controlled environments.' And she would do it again if necessary. One place she was sure The Voice hadn't lied--**I was made to survive.**

And she would. Nothing had stopped her before. Not permanently, anyway. Not yet.

But first, there was. . . him.

Yes. She would find him, somehow. She had to. Despite what that damn Voice had said, had turned out to be, Emma still felt the deep urge to find him. To be with him. He was, after all, her oldest friend, her one solid link to a real past. He was a part of her. Even if they had given him to her, to perfect their goddamn case study--he was a part of her.

Abruptly, she was in tears. Harsh, ragged sobs tore from her.

He was a part of her. Even if he was nothing but a ball of fur without an ounce of sense in his little skull, he was hers.

It had always been him, always. They had survived everything together--even Dominguez, even the **Nostramo**.

Emma Ripley threw back her head and cried out at the bland cell-walls, a cry of power and rage. "Damn you, Jonesy! **God damn you, Jonesy!**" *

CLONE

C/TA 881

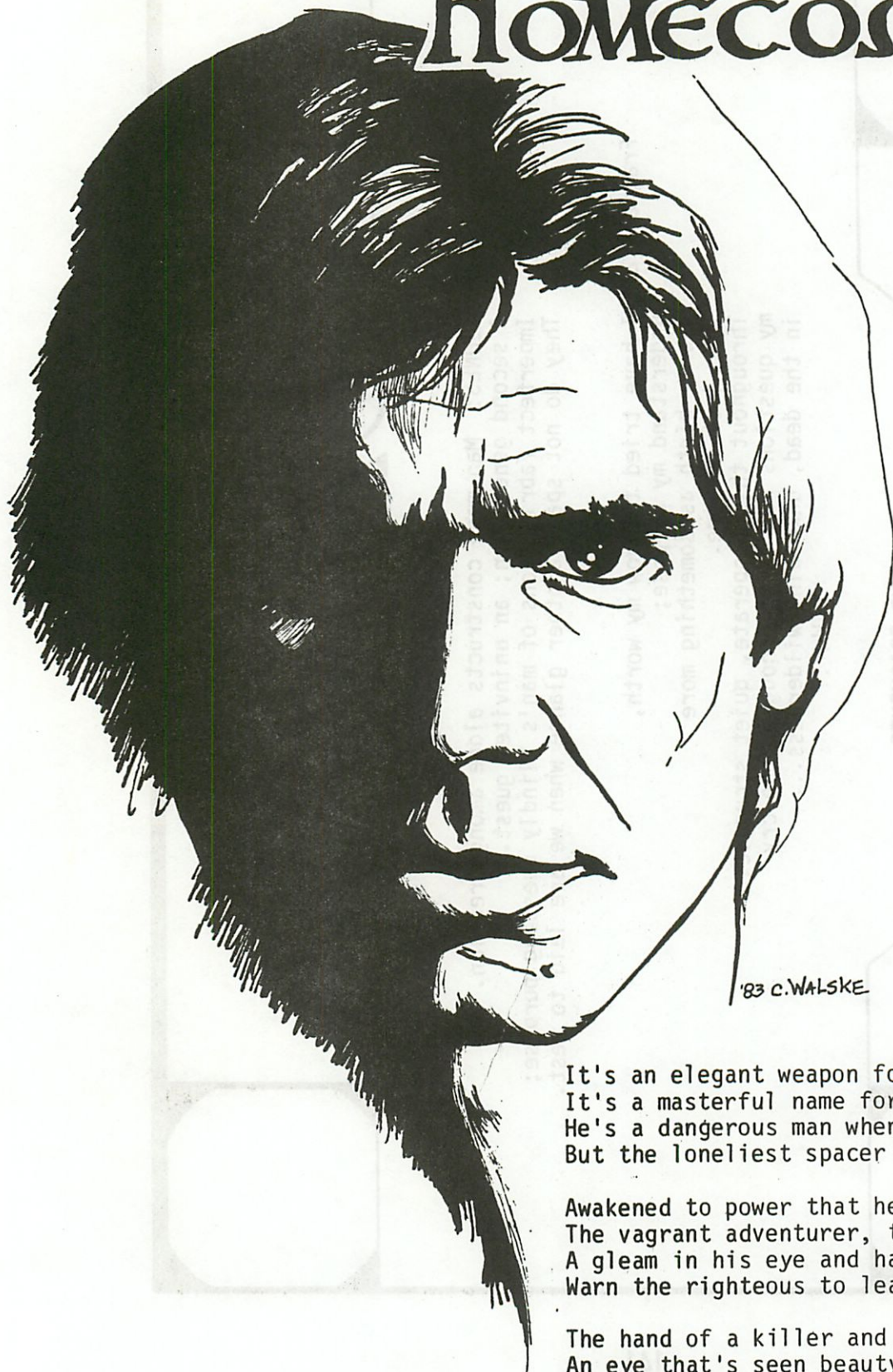
Fragment 1: CLONES: Man-made constructs alone among Creation.
A second generation; an uninvited guest.
Imperfect fabrications of man's blindly questing purpose;
They do not spare another glance when we are laid to rest.

Fragment 2: I have tried to know my worth,
understand my purpose;
see my birth as something more
than just machine.
Throughout this desperate, quiet struggle,
my questions hushed--my thoughts one cry
in the dead, unknowing wilderness...
WHY??

END FRAGMENTS

Barbara Greenberg

THE HOMECOMING



It's an elegant weapon for a scoundrel to wield.
It's a masterful name for a pirate to feel.
He's a dangerous man when the danger is real,
But the loneliest spacer e'er to come from Corell.

Awakened to power that he knows now to hone,
The vagrant adventurer, the champion has grown.
A gleam in his eye and half a smile when he's done,
Warn the righteous to leave the Falconrider alone.

The hand of a killer and pilot and knight,
An eye that's seen beauty and evil and fright,
A body that's worn and a heart seeking light--
He's a dangerous man searching for comfort tonight.

by Fern Marder & Carol Walske

Storm's night. Windswept clouds rolled above, building and breaking into fantastic shapes. Imagination lent them the power of drama and conflict, creating a skyscape of vast armies bearing spears of lightning and shields of thunder.

Under cover of the sky's fury, two young lords met for the first time, drawn together by the inscrutable needs of the Force. On a cliff's edge they met each other, one step from a sheer drop into crystalline, deadly light. Below spread the Palace of All in the Valley of Light on the planet Eternity. Home of the man--the twisted, life- and death-defying Dark Master of the Force--whom the millions knelt to as Emperor.

Dark the two lords were, tall and proud, kingly of bearing and rich with the knowledge of laughter and tears. The first to reach the cliff's edge wore burgundy, jet, and gold, but casually, as though the fine raiment might as well be rags. His eyes were green and deepset under straight eyebrows; a wide mouth curved into a wry smile as he surveyed the elements clashing above the Emperor's awesome, technologically perfect stronghold.

The second man approached slowly, his white, blue, and silver robes shimmering faintly in the storm's mirk. His face was pure and beautiful, as yet unmarked by any worldly pain. Only his grey eyes bore a burden, the weight of seeing past, present, and future intermingled.

The first lord stretched out his right hand, palm outward, fingers spread. "Jedi."

The second lord echoed the gesture. "Cadar." As their fingers touched, a web of gold and white, black and silver, blood-red and sea-blue glowed and crackled at the points of contact, then darted over their tall figures and vanished.

"We should not be here, nor should we know each other," said the Cadar. "The Force has brought us together for but a moment, a moment of peril, in the Emperor's domain. Let us deal as swiftly as we may."

"History has decreed us enemies, yet we need one another," responded the second man, the Jedi. He turned and looked out over the translucent facets and planes of the Palace of All. "The Emperor is stronger than I, or any of my Order. And the Purge has claimed the might of our numbers."

"He is also stronger than I am," agreed the Cadar reluctantly. "It is my shame and despair that he came from my Cadar kin. He searches for us constantly, and we remain hidden only by self-abasement and subterfuge. Yours and mine must join forces."

The Jedi laughed lightly. "Aptly put." He stared at the Emperor's home and his hands, warrior's weapons, clenched into fists. "He is a web of hunger, searching even now to consume the last of the Jedi. I am using all my power just to remain unnoticed, and to protect my world from his depredations. I sometimes fear I will not survive the battle."

"Our part of the battle is to hide and protect others. To defeat the Emperor, our children must join," said the Cadar. He raised his voice as a wind whipped at his cloak, drawing it into fluttering leaves of blood. "I have Seen this. A man and a woman, one a master Cadar, the other strong in the way of the Jedi, the two life-bonded together, would be able to call on such power as to shake the foundations of life. Together, they could withstand the Emperor, and scatter his being to the wells of dark and light so that never again could his soul coalesce. Only then will he be truly defeated."

"The Force tells me that you are right." The Jedi sighed. "But I have no children yet. Nor have I found a lifesharer among the dwindling numbers of my Order. However, I will pledge my children yet-to-be-born to you, Cadar. The Maker be willing, at least one of them will find heart and home among your family."

"I will pledge my children to you, Jedi," agreed the Cadar formally. "At the proper time, life and love will flower, and the Force will draw mine and yours together, though they be strangers. I feel it."

The Jedi had moved closer to the cliff's edge, until he stood poised on the brink, an eagle unsure whether to fly up into the storm or down into death. "Your Forcesight shows you life and hope. I see only ruin and turmoil. May your vision be the right one."

"We have the power to stand here at the heart of darkness and defy its evil," said the Cadar. "That should give hope enough to anyone."

* * * * *

A cacophony of howls, snorts, shrieks, and rasping hoots split the smoky, choking air. Spilled wine, decaying food, and vomit glistened on floor and tables; that stench and the feter of crowded, hot bodies mingled putrescently in the dim chamber. Jabba the Hutt and his cronies and lackeys were celebrating, as they did each morning and night, incessantly, to honor and glory in the day's toll of debauchery, cruelty and death.

The clamor rose to ear-splitting and nerve-fraying heights as the mob of creatures vented their laughter on the evening's hapless entertainment. Two slaves had been brought to Jabba's audience hall, two perfectly matched, red-haired human girl-twins just maturing into womanhood. One had already fallen to the Rancor's bottomless hunger, as her screaming, kicking and biting at all comers had won her that surprisingly kind oblivion. The other was standing motionless, numb and terrified, while Jabba chuckled hugely and aliens pinched and pawed at her scantily clad form.

"Dance," ordered Jabba in his grating, floor-shaking rumble. He shook the chain he held in one grimy paw, jerking the slavegirl and making her clutch at the cruel metal collar at her throat. One of Jabba's pet dancers grabbed the girl and showed her a few sinuous motions of legs and belly, shoving and poking at her until the newcomer clumsily began to mimic the actions.

The crowd jeered and brayed, and even their master sniggered once or twice at the spectacle. But his attention span was short, or perhaps he found the slavegirl's awkwardness unappealing. He jolted her to the floor with a yank on the chain, motioned the dancer aside, and roared out a command. "Bring Solo!"

The name roused Han out of his half-conscious lethargy, making him scramble to his feet against his pillar, his fists clenching uselessly. He was naked, had been so for weeks of his captivity, and his skin was dark with dirt and the marks of torment. His hair hung into his eyes and almost to his shoulders, half hiding the ring of black iron closed around his throat.

Two Gamorreans closed in on Han. One backhanded him across the face with a casual blow while the other opened the bolt high on the pillar that held the end of his chain. They grabbed the slave-links, one grasping the chain very close to the neck-choking collar, and then they yanked and pushed him into the center of the hall under Jabba's gaze. Han stood still, unmindful of the rough handling of the pig guards, unmindful of Jabba's mocking laughter, aware only of his own sickness, the weakness and pain that daily grew larger and darker.

"Strip the she," boomed Jabba. Three humans who served the crimelord as gamblers and petty thieves swarmed forward, eager to carry out that task. The girl cried out as hands pulled away the flimsy halter hiding her breasts. The boldest of the three men ripped the short skirt encircling her hips, and the piece of gold and blue fabric fell to the ground. The young woman's skin was startlingly pale, soft against the hard brown hands that grabbed at her flesh.

"Sex her, Solo," grated Jabba. "Show me a human's lust." The crowd, mostly non-human, cheered

and laughed.

Stupefied, Han looked up at the alien. The end of a water pipe trailed out of one corner of Jabba's mouth, brown-green spittle drooled out of the other. Han's gaze dropped to the girl, who was squirming weakly in two men's grasp. She was looking from face to face, her thin, elfin features desperate and pleading. She had no friends here, only tormentors. "What had Jabba wanted...?" He couldn't remember.

"Take her for mate, Solo, now," growled the huge alien impatiently. "Move her into position, you scum!"

The girl screamed as two men, laughing, grabbed her legs while the third hooked his hands under her shoulders. They raised her off the ground and pulled her legs apart. She whimpered and struggled uselessly. The spectators grew impatient for their next morsel of horror. "Come on, Solo, can't you get it up?" "Show us how good you are in a cockpit, flyboy!"

Pig guards prodded at Han, making him stumble forward. He looked at the slavegirl, at the red hair of her groin. A horrifying image burst into his mind, one of a small, dark-haired, dark-eyed princess being held and mistreated that way. Fading embers of life sparked to red rage and power, and Han Solo spun around and yanked his chain loose before the Gamorrean could even react in astonishment.

Gathering the heavy links in his right hand, Han swung at one of the humans holding the girl. The man ducked, but let go of the leg he held; in the same second, Han, yelling incoherently, lashed out with his left foot at a second man's genitals. The man didn't move back fast enough; he howled and clutched at his prize possessions.

The pig guards were strong and well-armed, but they weren't fast enough to catch this demon that everyone had thought to be half-dead and harmless. Han slipped under one's massive arms and leaped, not toward the doorway and potential escape, but at the immense bulk of the Hutt. The crimelord roared his outrage; the mob delighted in this unexpected performance.

The pest nicknamed Salacious Crumb pecked at Han's ankles, but the Corellian didn't heed the minor hurts. His resolute fury and strength, from out of nowhere, seemed limitless; he struck at Jabba's warty hide and swung his chain at the huge tawny eyes. The blow connected with the Hutt's deformed nose, and yellowish, viscous blood streamed from a gash. The crimelord howled and lashed his slug's tail.

Hands grabbed at Han, too many for him to shrug off or beat down. Slimy cold fingers insinuated their way between his collar and the nape of his neck, then yanked him backward. The prisoner fell, coughing and gasping for air. Ugly forms swarmed close around him, and fists, feet, and weapon-butts struck and battered at him until senselessness loomed near.

The Hutt's voice ground out words thick with vengeful hatred. "Take him to the prison level! If he is still so spirited, a half hour of the nerve-flayer will teach him obedience. You who were

supposed to be guards--for your incompetence, you will be stripped and left to the suns and the sands. Fortuna! Bring new guards and dispose of the she-human, however you choose."

Ten minutes later, three Gamorreans had finished immobilizing Solo and had set up the nerve-flayer, a primitive droid able to do only one job very well. Han hung helpless, his wrists attached to a pipe running across the ceiling, his ankles bound by a chain fastened to a ring in the floor.

Han's mind had already drifted far from his hurts and his plight. At first, his thoughts had been of Leia--images of her as the passionate, young warrior-princess he'd first met, as the wise woman-leader she had become. Concentration was difficult. He thought of Luke, of Chewie, and his **Falcon**. They seemed as distant as freedom, as life.

Distantly, a machine hummed and crackled. A wire, hot with power, seared across Solo's right flank and hip, drawing a gasping cry from him and galvanizing his muscles in a shudder of pain. The guards laughed and grunted at each other, then two of them left to report to their master. The third stood by the door, leaning on his battle-axe, snuffing and drooling as his nostrils quivered with excitement. The droid moved half a meter and its arm rose and arced forward again.

A cruel parody of life returned to Han; the wire etched its way into his skin, burning along nerves that sang of unceasing agony. He cried out his pain and despair. His mind, trying to escape, fled to Corell and the home he visited so infrequently. He felt a sudden sharp image of his father, and for some reason that hurt worse than all the torments he'd undergone since waking from carbon-freeze. Tears sprang to his eyes and he called out his father's name. Failure overwhelmed him. Futility tore at the remnants of his will.

The door swung open. The pig guard grabbed his weapon and hefted it--then fell back, choking and whining in desperate fear. He collapsed, unconscious; the battle-axe clattered onto the stone floor. A hooded and cloaked figure darted into the cell, then closed the heavy metal door and leaned on it for a moment.

The sounds came as a welcome interruption to Han's torture. He caught only glimpses out of the corner of his eye. He tried to ask what was going on, but an unexpected whiplash cut down his belly and across the top of his thigh. He cried out.

"Hold on, Han; I'll get you down in a minute," exclaimed a voice. A dark-defeating, soul-stirring voice.

"Luke?" His own voice cracked on incredulity and exhaustion. Han strained to see in the cell's dim light. To his right, just within his periphery of vision, a slender, dark-clad form reached for the droid's controls and shut it down.

The young man came around Han's side and faced him, lowering his hood and shaking free his fine blond hair. He looked up at the Corellian, his features full of compassion and alarm. "Now how the hell do I get you down from there?"

"The...droid reached up..." Han's joy at sight

of Luke was quickly replaced by questions, worry, and shame. He lifted his head and found the strength to put words to his fears. "Where'd you come from? You shouldn't be here, you'll get caught--"

"Hold still," said Luke, his tone determinedly cheerful. He reached under his cloak and pulled out a lightsaber. It sprang into green-edged radiance. A sideways, low swipe severed the length of chain under Han's feet. Then he backed away from the Corellian's form, eyeing the space above Han's bound wrists.

"Hey, what're you--" Han swallowed back his words. The young Jedi leaped, higher than his own muscles could possibly propel him, his sword of light cleaving upward and through Solo's fetters. Luke landed lightly and returned the saber to his belt, in time enough to catch Han and gently lower him to the floor.

"Not bad, kid," whispered the Corellian. "Now I owe you one." He closed his eyes, as a wash of pain swept through him once more, and sank into the surcease of unconsciousness.

The swiftness of Han's lapse into blackness frightened Luke. Kneeling, he leaned forward, his left hand reaching out to touch his friend's forehead. He was unprepared for the pain; he jerked his hand back, emitting a sound of surprised distress.

The pain was Han, a flood of despair, captivity and illness that was breaking down the Corellian's will faster and better than any physical torment. Chiding himself for cowardice, Luke reached out again. Prepared, he rode the assault a little better, and tried to combat the psychic hurts.

This was the first time Luke had ever intruded past his friend's innermost defenses, and he was astonished by Han's raw power, his essence of pride, independence, and joy in life, his intrepid readiness to adapt to change and meet danger. Under all, the young Jedi sensed a purpose so indomitable that it crested the death that would have already claimed a weaker man.

The core of Han Solo was someone Luke had only glimpsed on rare occasions. He wondered at it even while striving to ease Han's emotional turmoil. Han seemed a part of the Force, not a conscious wielder of that power but one who thrived on and unconsciously fitted himself to its patterns of surge and rest. Luke found himself suddenly, unrestrainedly loving all the simplicities and complexities of the Corellian pilot, and he sent forth all his empathy, loyalty and admiration to defeat the dark of Han's spirit.

Life stirred in Han again, and a tide of strength welled up to help the fighter regain his hopes for survival. In the Force, Luke gentled the Corellian's rising defiance, judging that the waiting weakness and pain were still too strong for Han to wholly conquer. The Jedi eased his friend into sleep, caressing Han's brow once more before straightening.

Luke stretched and breathed deeply, calling on his own reserves after that psychic tumult. Raising

his shields once again, he listened for any signs of disturbance in the Force, but all remained quiet. He dared to hope that the Force would stay with him while he and Han made their escape.

He glanced around. The Gamorrean remained unconscious; the creature was of limited sentence, easily directed and thus perfect for Jabba's needs. He looked down, trying to control his outrage and pity at sight of the gaunt, scarred Corellian who lay with such unaccustomed helplessness before him. His revulsion ran especially deep at sight of the slave-collar and chain.

Abruptly determined to remove the fetter, Luke again drew his lightsaber and ignited it. He knelt, waited until his control was sure and his hand steady, then with great care allowed the saber's shimmering edge to eat through the thick band of metal. Stopping before the sword came too close to Han's throat, he put away the weapon, then broke the collar at the weakest point. Calling on the Force, he bent it open, pulled it off the Corellian, and hurled it into a far corner of the cell.

Luke stood and considered his limited options for escape, none of which seemed particularly attractive. Then his gaze travelled from unconscious Gamorrean to sleeping Corellian, and his mind made a connection which made him want to laugh for its sheer ludicrousness. However, laughable or not, as he thought about it, the more it offered his best and easiest opportunity for an unnoticed getaway.

Luke woke the guard, and, directing him in the Force, made the Gamorrean not see the Jedi and believe that the Corellian had died from treatment. Then he followed surreptitiously as the lumbering alien took Solo's corpse out for disposal--which in this case turned out to be an ignominious garbage dump outside the fortress, home to all manner of scavengers and vermin. Leaving the Gamorrean with an injunction to tell Jabba of Solo's death, Luke radioed the protocol droid, who had been waiting some miles distant in an airskiff. Half an hour later, Luke, Han, and See-Threepio were skimming over the dunes to the east of Mos Eisley.

Luke's arrival back at the **Millennium Falcon**, with company, caused all the stir he could have hoped for. Chewbacca, guarding the ship's hangar, threw his crossbow into the air, let out an ululation of wild joy and charged to the speeder's side.

"Noisy brute, he'll bring half the spaceport down around us," Threepio complained. No one paid any attention.

Luke climbed out of the speeder, only to be instantly hugged by the Wookiee. Laughing, protesting feebly, he extricated himself and tried to help Chewie with Han. But the huge beast pushed him aside with a gentle, territorial shove, and picked up the Corellian, wrapped in Luke's cloak, with fiercely protective tenderness.

Chewie's howl had alerted the other occupants of the starcraft. The main ramp lowered and Lando and Leia emerged, armed and ready for they knew not what. Astonishment and delight transfigured them both; Leia beat Lando in the race to the hangar entrance by a good two feet. The young woman's joy

dimmed as she saw Han's limp form, and she went forward slowly, like a queen to her king's bier.

In his excitement, Lando hit Luke on the shoulder hard enough to make the smaller man stagger. "You grandstander, you did it all by yourself! We were just about ready to call in the rebel fleet and blow Jabba's fortress apart!"

Luke allowed himself to be grabbed and shaken. "Sorry I couldn't get back here or get word out sooner. Security was pretty tight at Jabba's."

"What the hell, you did it!"

"Would you two stop chattering and get ready for liftoff?" interrupted Leia, her tone as sharp as a wound. "I don't want to spend one minute longer here than I have to."

Lando took one swift look at her and took off for the ship on the double. "I'll get port clearance."

"Leia, Han'll be okay," said Luke, falling into step beside her and Chewie.

She cast him one distracted glance. "What did they do to him, Luke?" she asked with soft anguish. "He looks-- How long ago was he let out of carbon-freeze?"

"At least a month, from some talk I heard," replied Luke, trying to sound noncommittal and trying not to reveal any of the horrors he'd seen during the few days he'd spent in the Hutt's lair. "He just needs medical attention and some proper care."

* * * * *

Han woke with a pilot's subconscious knowledge that his ship had just ceased to exist in normal space by the kickover of the hyperdrive. 'That'll show those Imperial slugs,' he thought drowsily. Then his eyes flickered open as logic and memory began to catch up to his conscious. Hyperdrive. His ship had been fixed. He was free.

'Leia. Luke.' He struggled to rise but couldn't. His senses were numbed and his muscles unresponsive. No vestiges of pain troubled him. He looked around, recognizing the **Falcon's** compact sickbay. His left arm was encased by a pressure-pak, which was monitoring his condition and feeding medication into his arm.

The hatch slid open and a slender, red- and brown-clad form entered cautiously. "Leia?" he ventured, trying to see clearly in the dim light.

"You're awake!" The princess took two long strides and knelt at his bedside, reaching for his right hand and drawing it to her. She lifted eyes huge with concern to his features. "How do you feel?"

He shook his head and smiled at her, marveling at the new, delicate shape of her high cheekbones and the firming of her jawline into a sweeping curve, changes which had seemingly occurred overnight. "You don't want to ask that question." He lifted his right hand, intertwined with hers, and let it brush against her cheek. "How do you feel?"

Her mouth shaped into a tremulous smile, and she took a deep, calming breath. "Better, now that you're here." She bent her head to his hand and kissed the back of his fingers. "I'm so sorry we didn't get to you sooner, Han. I've missed you so much..."

"Yeah, me too," Han said awkwardly. "Leia--"

He was interrupted by the opening of the door. Luke came in, looking perplexed. He frowned from Leia to Han and said repressively, "You shouldn't be awake and talking yet."

"So what are you doing here talking to me?" Han inquired innocently. Leia covered her mouth to hide a smile.

"You must feel better. You're already reverting to your normal--um--charming self." Luke paused and added puzzledly, "I thought I heard you call out to me. That's why I stopped by." He glanced at Leia. "Sorry; I won't interrupt you two any longer."

"No, I just dropped in myself to check how he was," explained Leia, moving toward Luke and the door.

"If one or both of you don't stay and fill me in on what's happened lately," said Han dangerously, "I'll talk to myself, which gets boring pretty fast. I'm all right--well, sort of," he amended, as the two of them gave him 'sure you are' looks. He spread his hands wide. "Please stay and talk to me?"

Luke laughed softly. "Who can resist an appeal like that? I must say, you do look better, although some of that's undoubtedly due to the shower and grooming we gave you."

Han patted his now-smooth jaw and chin. "I don't remember a thing."

"Well, me, Chewie, and Lando all wrestled you into the shower--"

"They wouldn't let me help," complained Leia.

"--and Chewie did most of the work of washing you. Then Lando and I had to dry you and Chewie. It felt like we were all drowning there for a while," Luke said, chuckling. "We used a depilatory on your face--"

"No wonder it itches," Han commented.

"And I cut your hair," finished Leia.

The Corellian lifted his head and carefully felt his tawny locks. "It's too long."

"I like it shaggy," the princess said sweetly. "It makes you look more like Chewie, who is truly handsome."

"Go ahead, insult me," said Han in injured tones. "When Luke was in the hospital, he got a kiss."

"Shameless greed," murmured Leia. Han gave her a hurt look, then closed his eyes. Swiftly taking advantage of that, she moved to his side and planted

a light kiss on his forehead. He, however, was faster than she: his hands came up to clasp her face, and he moved his mouth to meet hers. For an instant she struggled, then gave herself totally to the embrace.

Luke tapped his foot against the deck and looked the other way. "I thought you wanted to talk."

They separated, Han sinking back with a delighted gleam in his eyes. Leia straightened. She gathered up her dignity but retained a glow of amusement and happiness.

"Now that the important things have been taken care of, tell me what's been goin' on," declared Han. "How long was I kicking around in carbonite?"

Leia answered in a low voice. "It's been three months since Bespin." Han whistled. Luke and Leia went on to tell him about their escape from Bespin, the massing of the rebel fleet, their decision--in the face of official disapproval--to go to Tatooine.

"I wish I knew how to thank you for coming after me," said Han, smiling at his two friends, feeling the slow return of warmth and strength. "You got me out of there when I couldn't do a thing for myself. I won't forget that. Where're Chewie and Lando? I hope at least one of 'em is in the cockpit."

"Chewie's at the conn," Luke answered. "He keeps swearing Lando'll fly us into a star if he lets him pilot."

"Tell 'em I want to see them both, huh? Like before I fall asleep again?" Han raised a finger warningly as Luke looked doubtful. "And no backtalk about my weakened condition!"

Both of them laughed, and Luke gave him a mock salute. "As you wish, Captain, sir. Right away, sir." He backed out of the cabin. Leia gave Han a small, rueful smile, and followed Luke out.

Her name was on his lips even as she turned away from him and left. Han sank back, weary, happy, and frustrated. Bespin looked like a nightmare with just one golden moment of dream. If he could only find a way to call the dream back--

A knock sounded on the hatch. "Come-in," Han called.

Lando walked in, bearing a full tray of food before him like a peace offering. "You sure I'm not disturbing you?"

"Dinner in bed?" Han said, grinning. "What's gotten into you, Lando?"

Lando reached across the Corellian and attached the tray to two hinges set in the wall alongside Han's bunk. He cast quick, nervous glances at Han, seeming strangely shy and contrite. "I tried to make something you'd like," he said.

"Hey, what are you so worried about? I'm not about to die!"

"If you did, it would be my fault," Calrissian said flatly. He lifted his hands and spoke with an

intensity that revealed the unexpected depths beneath the hustler's facade. "I owe you, Solo. I led you into a trap and couldn't even warn you. I'm sorry."

Han tried to match his friend's sober tone. "You got it wrong, Lando. I owe you, 'cause I brought Vader down on you. You'd still have your nice little operation if it weren't for me."

The ex-administrator's eyebrows arched in astonishment at Han's words, but then doubt and self-recrimination crept back into his expression. "Maybe," he answered. "Han, I couldn't even hint at the trouble. Vader was--"

"Look, I really don't need to know what he did or threatened to do to you," Han cut in brusquely. "It's not your fault, Lando. It's not anybody's fault, except maybe Vader's."

"But--"

"I'm fine, you pirate, it's all over with!" Solo waited a beat, then said, "Thanks for rescuing Leia, Chewie, and Luke. You are a real hero after all."

"Gah," said Calrissian in disgust. He moved restlessly, seeming to look for a way to vent his frustration. He clenched one hand into a fist and shook it at the Corellian. "You're being too god-damned noble, Solo. If you'd hand me my head, I wouldn't have to feel guilty the rest of my life!"

Han laughed, venting the first real pleasure he'd felt in weeks. "Sorry, ol' buddy. I'm not bein' noble--I just don't see why you should pay extra for suffering under Vader. Now forget it, huh?"

"If that's the way you want it," surrendered Lando with a warm, unpretentious smile. He let his hand drop to Han's shoulder. "If there's anything I can do--"

"I'll think of something," the Corellian replied, giving him a wink. "Meanwhile, thanks for the food."

* * * * *

Han drifted awake. He stretched, wondering what day it was and wondering how long it would take him to get tired of his sickbed. For a time, it was very good. His ship was a familiar haven and his friends were nearby, intangibles that helped to disguise and bury the cold reek of Jabba's evil.

An interrogative growl outside the sickbay hatch made him look up with a smile. "Come on in, Chewie." His kinsmate stuck his head in, snuffled approvingly, and came to his side.

"I've been wondering where you were. Everybody else has been bothering me; you tryin' to avoid me?"

The Wookiee emitted a hurt, sustained rumble. "I looked in on you an hour ago to find you fast asleep. I don't encourage sick cubs to talk for hours and do more than they should."

Han reached out and put his hand over his friend's shaggy arm. "I missed you. Where are we

and when are we?"

"We left the desert world yesterday morning. Hyperspace surrounds us; we are on our way to the rebel fleet." Chewbacca looked down at Han, uttered a sound akin to a purr, and gently laid his right paw over Han's heart. "I have been lonely enough to regret that ever we joined this meaningless struggle. Too many deaths for no purpose, until each side looks the same. You are all that matters to me."

Han felt the Wookiee's deep worries and knew they sprang from the time on Hoth, when he and Chewie, in deed if not in word, had relinquished their freedom to the rebellion. "You know we both found people worth staying for, pal. And they all came to Tatooine to rescue me. Can you really say that doesn't count?"

The beast hung his head and growled softly, unhappily. "I watched you forced to submit to the Death-father and suffer a sleep akin to death. I wanted myself to die then."

Han uttered a sound of protest and discomfort. "We didn't have a lot of choice of what we could do, Chewie. Besides...there was the princess."

"She loves you."

"That's what she said," the Corellian murmured, smiling.

"And you?"

Han shot a dark glance at the Wookiee, then pushed his pillows up against the wall and sat up. He scowled. "You want me to say no, don't you?"

"I want you to be honest with yourself and her."

"Being honest with her isn't fair to her."

"And whose fault is that?"

Han looked up with an unhappy, angry expression. "Aw, Chewie, don't needle me, huh? It ain't good for my health!"

The Wookiee growled threateningly at that, then vocalized a gentle, but unyielding statement: "To go on with your courting will only hurt both of you, when time comes for you to leave her. Or have you forgotten your family-oath?"

"No, I haven't forgotten! Lay off, Chewie!"

The beast took a step backward and lowered his head. "I do not mean to upset you, Hearth-Brother. Never would I hurt you, you know that."

Han relaxed tense-trembling muscles and sank back. "I know, Chewie. I'm sorry I yelled at you. I'm not...all together just yet."

"I know. Everyone is so worried that each tries to find hourly reasons to come in here to look at you."

"What good that'll do me I don't know," Han grumbled, but only half-heartedly. "Reassure them that I'm okay, huh? All I want is to sleep."

"I will keep them away from you. Do you wish me to talk to your family as well?"

"My family?"

"I chose to send word to Corell once away from Bespin," Chewbacca responded in a soft, rising rumble. "I had failed to protect you; I knew not where the bounty hunter was taking you; I knew not whether you would survive. Don't glare at me, Lone One; your parents have the right to know."

"Yeah, I suppose they do. I'd better call 'em myself--just as soon as I'm up out of this bed."

"Leia, I've got to talk to you."

She looked up. She was sitting on the circular banquette, facing a pile of papers--no doubt unfinished political business--in front of her on the table. "Han, what is it? You look terrible."

Han glanced around the central bay, realizing for the first time its complete lack of privacy. That had never been important before. He tried to think of where two people could talk, but could only come up with the obvious, not-very-good solution. "D'you mind if we go to my quarters?"

She eyed him as if he'd just made a far more pointed proposition. "If you wish. What's wrong?"

Her question trailed behind him as he strode down the gangway and into his private space. Moving with abrupt speed, he pulled out the stool attached to the small counter where he did his ship's necessary inventory and accounting. He perched on the cushion and stared at the princess, who by now was twisting her fingers nervously and looking at him in pale trepidation.

"I have to go home." He hadn't meant the statement to sound so harsh, but there was no way to take it back.

She cast a doubtful glance at his bed and then sat carefully on its edge. "What do you mean? Corell?"

"Yeah."

"But why?"

He bent his head and rubbed his hands along his thighs, but the action merely served to remind him of his frustrated pain. Without looking up, he said roughly, "My father's dead."

"Oh, Han, no!" She surged up off the bunk and made a move toward him. Apparently she felt his sudden tension, for she stopped still. "I'm so sorry. When-- Han, I'm sorry. I wish there was something more I could say."

In answer to her half-started question, he answered flatly, "It happened about a month ago. Obviously I was kinda out of touch at the time. I just talked to my mother today."

To his surprise, she said furiously, "Curse Boba Fett and Jabba! How did you ever get involved with that gangster anyway? Oh, never mind; that's a

stupid question just now. I'm sorry."

"I had a bet with the Hutt," Han responded. "He won. I didn't know he'd take his payment out of me in years and blood."

"And you treated the debt with honor even if he didn't." He shrugged. She added quickly, "But of course you have to go home. You'll take Chewie with you?"

"Yeah."

"Well, you can drop the rest of us off on--oh, I don't know what's between Tatooine and Corell, but just about any neutral planet will do. We'll make our way back to the fleet."

"I'll see if I can't arrange for a ship for you three and the droids," he said uncomfortably, wishing he could invite all of them to his home. Luke and Leia were as much family to him as the rest of his kin, but now he'd never be able to acknowledge that.

Leia sat back down again, regarding him with anxious compassion. "I know you can't easily put a time limit in mourning, but when do you think you'll be able to rejoin us?"

A tremor sang through his blood. "I don't know. I haven't been home in four years."

A short pause developed into a long silence, an interval of anger and increasingly desperate frustration for Han. Finally, Leia said gently but inexorably, "Will you get in touch with us when you can? I'll give you our latest code; it should still be good by the time you need to find us."

Han tried to find some way not to look or sound awkward. "I don't know how long it'll be. I've got family obligations...I'm the oldest. There might be, uh, legal problems to settle."

Leia moved her head and opened her eyes wide; their velvety brown depths searched Han until he wanted to fight or hide. Slowly her features became disbelieving, bitter. "Why do I have this terrible fear that you're not coming back?" she whispered.

He held her gaze with his; it was all he could do.

"Han--?"

He couldn't speak; he shook his head. His right hand tightened on his leg until his thigh muscle protested, but still the pain wasn't enough to distract him from this waiting anguish.

"Is what I asked you on Bespin true?" she continued relentlessly. "Now that we've rescued you, are you still 'as good as gone'?"

"Hey," he protested. "That's not fair. I owe Luke--and the rest of you--more than I'll ever be able to repay for saving me, but that's got nothin' to do with my goin' home. Hell! What rotten timing!"

"Just answer my question."

He ached to tell her the truth, but his

mother's grief and the overwhelming weight of his father's death sat on his thoughts and constricted his words. "I--" His voice threatened to break, so he inhaled deeply before trying again. "I don't know if I can come back, Your Highness."

Her face was graven with pain. She struggled for and regained control. "I don't understand."

"What's to understand?" Han asked tightly. "I've gotta go home, and you've gotta go back to your rebellion. It's better this way."

"How?" she countered. "Better for you?"

"Better for both of us. I don't belong in your rebellion; never did. I kept trying to tell you that."

"Yes, you did," she said softly, disbelievingly. "So why did you stay?"

Solo shrugged. "Had no place better to go."

"Thank you for rating us higher than Jabba the Hutt! That's exceedingly generous of you." The princess stared at the Corellian, and her features made a bewilderingly quick change from bitter anger to soft, aching appeal. "Han, you haven't sounded like this since--since after Ord Mantell. I know you must be upset about your father and that you weren't home when...that you weren't home to take care of your mother and the rest of your family. I wish I could do something to ease your sorrow."

Han bent his head and closed his eyes briefly, unable to stand her compassion, wishing that she had stayed angry. He began to feel a self-disgust that threatened to emerge into uncontrollable, damaging rage. "Look, I appreciate your concern, Princess," he muttered. "And I'm sorry. I have to go. You probably won't ever see me again."

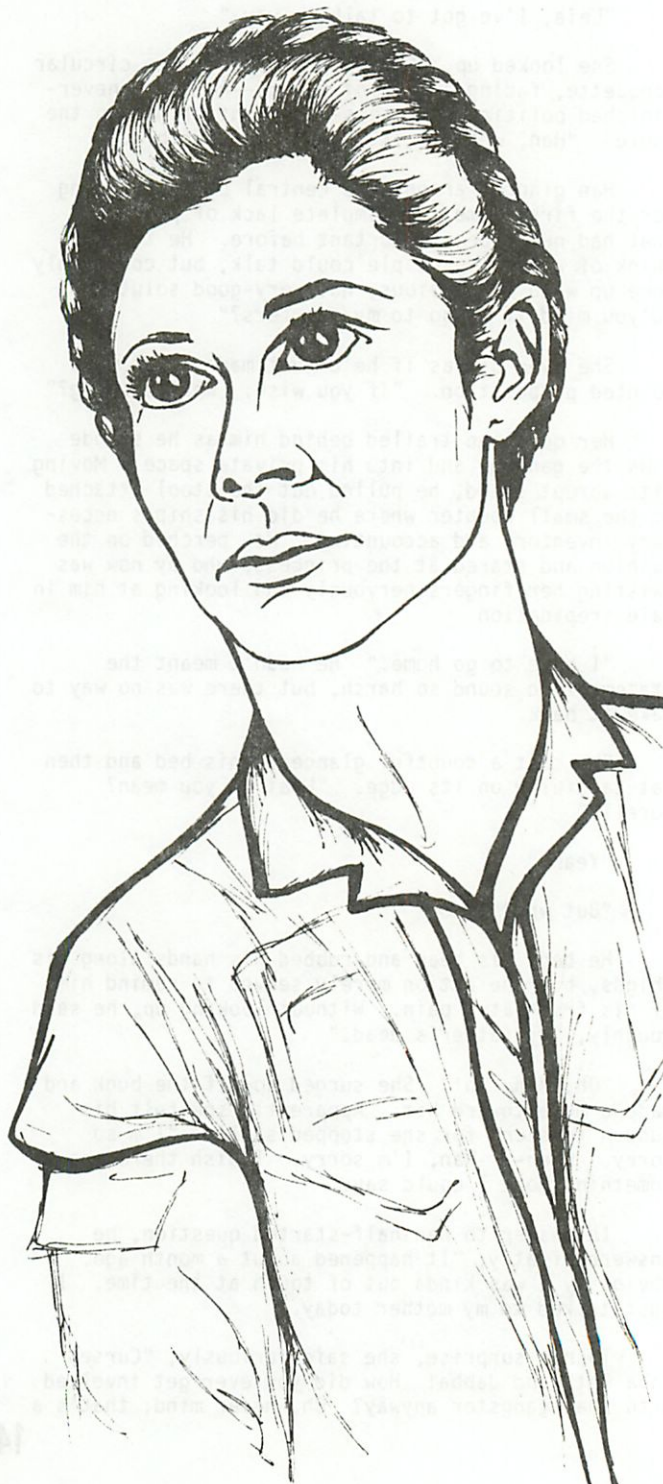
"I love you," she whispered. "Why are you doing this to me? Why do I always lose everything I ever care for?"

"You shouldn't care about me," he declared violently, causing her to jump. "I'm an outlaw; I've smuggled all kinds of things, including weapons and drugs. There're at least ten worlds where the law would kill me if they caught me. I was in the Imperial Starfleet--yeah, me, Your Rebel Highnessness--and got court-martialed on four charges. Maybe you think the name 'pirate' is romantic. Well, it's not and I'm not."

"I never said it was," Leia answered, her voice still a bare, numb whisper. "I don't want to know what you've done. I thought that...I thought all that was behind you."

"My family's outlaw too," Han said brusquely. "And I've never committed myself to anything and I've never stayed long in any one place. I don't like to risk my skin and I don't believe in causes."

"I suppose that's why you didn't save Luke over the **Death Star**?" Leia pointed out with merciless incredulity. "That's why you didn't get me off Hoth at great personal risk? That's why you didn't calmly and...and honorably accept the fate Vader prescribed for you on Bespin--a commitment to possible death?"



Han clenched his hands into fists. "I did what I had to do. That doesn't make me brave or noble. Stop tryin' to make me into something that I'm not!"

"I'm trying to understand you!"

"Why should you bother? I'm nothing to you, Your Worshipfulness; I don't belong where you belong and I got nothin' to do with where you're going." Han tried to ease his wrath as embers of pain kindled in her eyes. "You need--deserve--better than me."

"Maybe you should stop trying to live down to your reputation!" She sprang to her feet, desperate frustration in her face and in her movements. "Han, I don't care what you are or where you've been! Why do you keep trying to put me above you? I'm a traitor, a spy, a rabble-rouser! Is any of that supposed to stop me from loving you? You taught me never to underestimate or presume what anybody was. You taught me that social hierarchies didn't matter. You taught me independence instead of loneliness, and how to question everything I'd ever learned or felt!" She stopped, took a deep breath, and ended in a small, terribly vulnerable voice, "You taught me how to show what I feel."

Images of the 'ice princess' of Hoth flickered through his mind: so regal she had been, wrapped in war and politics, untouched and untouchable. Then the thaw had come, against all odds, bringing her to open and vital passion. He savored those memories, both the fights and the shared laughter. "I'm sorry, Princess."

"Sorry?" she shot back. "Sorry for teaching me?"

"I never thought you'd get...so involved." He hesitated, then added slowly, softly, "I never meant to hurt you--like this."

"You don't love me. Do you?"

He let long moments pass before he could trust his emotions or his voice. Raising his eyes to her face, he said bluntly, "I can't."

"You can't?"

Solo closed his ears to her cry of pain, and tried to bury his own needs. He lowered his head, unable to look at her any longer, for she could wrest the truth from him with a mere look of appeal. He shook his head and muttered, "It can't be."

Anguish again became anger. "Why not?"

"Just leave me alone, will you?"

A welter of broken emotions filled the silence: pain, outrage, despair, hurt pride, incomprehension, all as tangible as if they had attained solid shapes. The Corellian stared down at his hands resting on his legs and hardened himself by thinking about the probable manner of his father's death. Compared with that, all else faded into shadowy meaninglessness.

"Han?"

It was a whisper, a heartrending plea. The man's hands gripped with convulsive tightness on his

knees, and then he slowly looked up. The princess' dark eyes glistened with welling tears, and her mouth trembled. As he said and did nothing, she choked once on enraged grief and fled the cabin.

Chewbacca ended up having to make all the arrangements, with Threepio helping on translations. A small ship was hired on Talisin and flown out by a droid to intersect in orbit with the **Falcon**. The Wookiee had given his silent, rib-cracking farewell hugs and padded off to the cockpit, and the droids had already moved into the second ship with the little baggage. The four humans now stood awkwardly in the cargo bay, at the hatchway of the transfer tube that connected the two starcraft.

Lando was the only one visibly unaffected by the tensions of the past two days. He grabbed Han, hugged him warmly, then stood looking at him for a moment. "You take care, huh?"

"Sure," said Han wryly. "I always aim to, anyway. Don't bet on any long shots, ol' buddy."

"You should talk," retorted Lando. "I'm not forgettin' you won this bird on about a million-to-one." He cast a knowing glance at Han, Leia, and Luke, then grinned in farewell and jauntily stepped out of the **Falcon** and into the transfer tube.

An uncomfortable little silence eddied about the remaining threesome. After a moment, reluctantly, Luke stepped forward. "I'm sorry it's bad news that takes you home," he offered, with touching sincerity. "I'm glad you've got Chewie with you. I wish we could do something more for you."

Han didn't know how much Luke knew of the trouble between him and Leia, but obviously the young Jedi was tactfully ignoring it. He hoped both he and Leia would be capable of such magnanimous treatment toward each other. "You've already done more for me than I deserve," he answered--aiming for a tone halfway between casual and deep-felt, and failing miserably. "Thanks for braving Jabba's lair for me, Luke."

Luke looked suddenly frustrated. "I wish I'd been able to kill him for what he did to you!"

Han shook his head. "He's got a right to live." At the Jedi's swift glance of wonder, he added hastily, "He'd only be replaced by someone else. Better the known enemy than the unknown one."

"Right," Luke said slowly, clearly still evaluating the import of his friend's words. He reached out and gripped Han's hand briefly, and tried to smile nonchalantly. "This time, you be careful."

Han had heard about the rest of the horrors of Bespin, albeit in abbreviated form, so he replied soberly, "You too. Take care of the rebellion for me." Then he turned to the princess.

She was standing a little apart, wearing a comfortable, noncommittal tan and blue rebel uniform. Her hair was braided and coiled around her head in such a way as to remind Han again of the new, mature angles and planes of her tapering-oval face. Three months' lapsed time had brought her to poised womanhood. It was doubtful he'd ever know

what other changes the future promised for her.

Leia was eyeing Han as if wishing he didn't stand between her and the hatchway. She rubbed her hands together, then dropped them guiltily.

Han saw that she was having as much difficulty as he in thinking of something to say. "Try not to work too hard, Your Highness."

"Please wish your family well," she said formally. "I hope you and all of yours find an easy path through your sorrows."

"Thank you." Unaccountably, dismayingly, the Corellian found himself thinking of Alderaan. He could feel that she thought of it too. This reminder of their mind-kinship brought only pain and intolerable loneliness as Han began to taste the full bitterness of their separation. He told himself his name, his proud, self-centered name, his singleminded purpose, and was able to recover his equanimity. He gestured aimlessly. "Good luck to you."

She bowed her head with regal dignity. Han had to force himself not to bow back, teasingly, and invent some new title for her. Looking past him, she began to move toward the hatch.

The thought of their parting on such a note of stiff strangeness was unbearable; as Leia went past him, Han reached out and took hold of her arm. She swung toward him, eyes lighting with hurt fury, then pulled her arm away with unnecessary urgency.

"Hey," Han protested softly, aching at the touch and its sundering. "I just...well. Take care of yourself, Princess."

She didn't look at him. "And you too," she responded in a barely audible voice.

As Han turned to watch her go, he saw Luke still waiting, framed by the arc of the transfer tube, his features revealing mingled affection and concern. Han momentarily resented his presence, then told himself it was better for the kid to know--the better to comfort Leia. As the princess stepped out of the **Falcon**, the Corellian turned away.

"Hey, hotshot," said Luke--a touch mockingly, Han thought. He pivoted. The young blond raised his right hand to his forehead and added, with dead seriousness, "May the Force be with you."

As on a similar, but mirror-reverse occasion, Han stared, startled, and wondered what had motivated the deceptively simple words. But Luke merely smiled ruefully at him and followed Leia to the smaller ship. Han headed slowly, wearily forward to the cockpit and Chewie, knowing that the cargo hatch would close automatically once the transfer tube had disengaged. They were gone. She was gone. Nothing in the universe could undo the present, and the future was already threading into its preordained tapestry.

* * * * *

The marsh was still, the ground mist floating slowly about Luke and Leia's ankles. Twilight darkened the trees, vines, and lush undergrowth into

a seemingly impenetrable, three-dimensional web, but the two kept to the path with unerring ease.

Leia spoke for the first time since they'd landed. "I know you've been here before, Luke, but why does it feel so familiar to me? The air is breathing memories. It's so alive..."

"It takes one that way at first," Luke said softly, feeling a touch of pleasure that he could feel at home in this place of Jedi mastery. He raised his right hand and pointed to the many-windowed mound up ahead. "There's where my master lives."

Inside, the hearth-fire was bright, its darting flames casting a warm glow on the curved walls and low ceiling of Yoda's haven. The Jedi Master welcomed both of them as if he had been expecting them, which he probably had. His demeanor was unassuming, infectiously harmonious, and Luke found himself relaxing immediately. All at once he realized, looking at Yoda, the true mastery of the Force: to keep a balance that cared nothing for time or passing mores. All things, good or ill, had their place. War and the many tumults of sentient life were just drops of water in the vast ocean of the Force.

"This is Leia Organa, Master Yoda, a princess of Alderaan," said Luke, briefly touching the young woman who sat, looking a trifle nervous, next to him. "She heard me call out to her in the Force. Her talent's getting stronger all the time, and I don't believe I can train her as she should be. That's why I brought her. And I came back because I promised. I want to finish my training."

"Glad am I to meet you," Yoda interrupted, nodding and smiling at Leia. He reached for his Gimer stick and used it to punctuate his words. "Peace and life do you bring to the Force, unlike this reckless, headstrong one." The staff touched Luke's knee, and the gnome chuckled, making Leia and even Luke join in, albeit hesitantly.

"I know it was reckless, but I couldn't forsake my friends," Luke said fervently. "Maybe you and Ben saw that I wouldn't be able to do any good, but that's not enough for me. If I can't do or try, then I might as well give up on becoming a Jedi. I recognize that I'm fallible, untaught, and undisciplined. But I'll keep acting, working, and doing whatever I can!"

Yoda chuckled. "No explanations do you need to make to me, young one. If you did not care for your friends, afraid I would be for your enemies. Proud am I that you acted with such conviction. But alarmed I was, yes, at what befell you. Give me your hand."

Never doubting which one Yoda meant, Luke looked down at his right hand, then hesitantly extended it across the two feet separating them from the Jedi Master. Yoda touched it with his gnarled, cool fingers, and Luke felt something kin to a shiver within the sensitive bionic circuitry.

"This troubles you," said the Jedi Master softly, patting the hand. "A symbol of your enemy you see it, hmmmh? Do you fear or relish this bequest you share with him?"

Luke wanted to pull back his hand, but the power of Yoda's vibrant Force aura held it in gentle captivity, making the young man ever more aware of the hand's lack of life and the Force. He looked at Leia, who gazed at him compassionately and voiced the desire he was feeling just then. "Ask him, Luke."

He faltered for a moment, knowing that never again would he be able to live on the seesaw of belief or disbelief. But ignorance had almost killed him on Bespin, and he would not seek that form of darkness for any reason. "Master Yoda, I need to know," he said. "Is my father Anakin Skywalker...or Darth Vader?"

Yoda let go of Luke's hand, and Luke felt it ache and throb, reminding him of the way his living hand had felt during his lightsaber duel. "Both," the small being said simply.

Luke drew in a deep breath, hardly feeling Leia's comforting touch on his left arm. The confirmation was less upsetting than he'd expected; he'd known, all along, deep down, that it was the truth. "How?" he asked violently. "Ben told me--" He looked up for a moment, half hoping to hear or feel Kenobi. "Ben told me Vader murdered my father."

"So literal you are," Yoda replied soberly. "Obi-Wan wished Skywalker's children to be innocent."

"And too wrapped in his own hurt and shame was Obi-Wan," said a familiar, weary, courtly voice. It came from the air between Luke and Yoda, eliciting a wondering gasp from Leia and a conflicting mixture of hope and resentment in Luke. "I trained Anakin Skywalker. The pain and damage of his fall I could not pass on to you, Luke. I did not see that your destinies would be so closely intertwined."

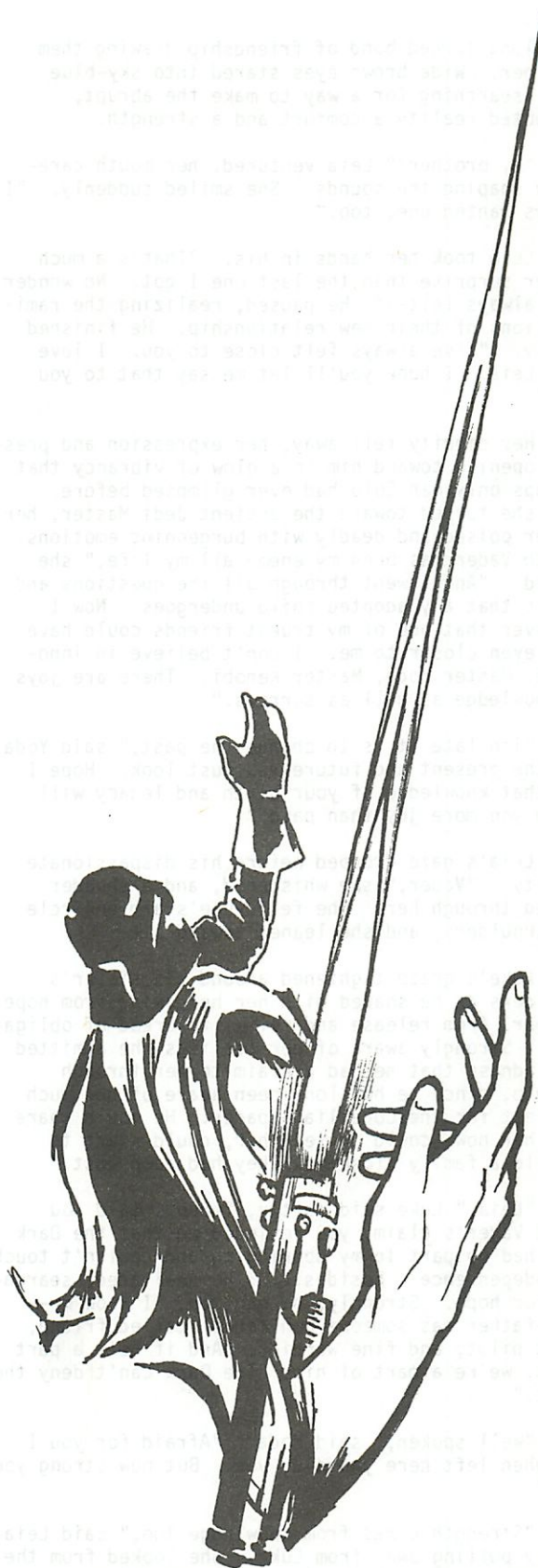
His teacher's fallibility was a new and uncomfortable concept for the young Jedi, but easier to accept than the thought of a deliberate lie. Luke could not even guess at the necessities of the past. Nor did he have the right to judge Kenobi's actions --which had been, intrinsically, on his behalf. He tried to think about his father as the ebony-cloaked death-image from Bespin, but the two refused to merge. "He didn't know either, did he? About me, I mean."

"No," admitted Kenobi. Luke believed he could trace in the air the faint blue and white shimmer of his master's age- and sorrow-graven face. "I don't know how he finally found out."

"No time remains for mysteries," murmured Yoda. "Innocence long-sheltered now must claim its full inheritance."

The air was filled with an old man's sigh. "Am I still too much of a fool, my Master, to wish for simplicity? Luke, Princess Leia, I ask for your forgiveness. Our twin hopes you were, brought up apart, raised in families that--we hoped--cared for your souls and not your lineage. You are Prince and Princess of the Sith, children of Anakin and Evlyn, Luke and Leia Skywalker, born here on Dagobah."

Newfound brother and sister turned to each other instinctively, shock and the transfiguration



of a long-forged bond of friendship drawing them together. Wide brown eyes stared into sky-blue ones, searching for a way to make the abrupt, undoubted reality a comfort and a strength.

"My brother?" Leia ventured, her mouth carefully shaping the sounds. She smiled suddenly. "I always wanted one, too."

Luke took her hands in his. "That's a much better surprise than the last one I got. No wonder I've always felt--" He paused, realizing the ramifications of their new relationship. He finished simply. "I've always felt close to you. I love you, Leia. I hope you'll let me say that to you now."

Her dignity fell away, her expression and presence opening toward him in a glow of vibrancy that perhaps only Han Solo had ever glimpsed before. Then she turned toward the ancient Jedi Master, her manner poised and deadly with burgeoning emotions. "Darth Vader has been my enemy all my life," she stated. "And I went through all the questions and doubts that any adopted child undergoes. Now I discover that one of my truest friends could have been even closer to me. I don't believe in innocence, Master Yoda, Master Kenobi. There are joys in knowledge as well as sorrows."

"Too late it is to change the past," said Yoda. "To the present and future you must look. Hope I do, that knowledge of your birth and legacy will bring you more joy than pain."

Leia's gaze dropped before his dispassionate honesty. "Vader," she whispered, and a shudder passed through her. She felt Luke's arm encircle her shoulders, and she leaned toward him.

Luke's grasp tightened around his sister's shoulders as he shared with her her swing from hope to fear, from release and relief to dread of obligation. Strongly aware of her feelings, he admitted to gladness that he had a claim to her through kinship, since he had long been aware of how much she felt for the Corellian spacer. He could share with her now, could protect her, could start to rebuild a family closeness they had each lost.

"Leia," Luke said softly, "when I told you about Vader's claim, you reminded me that the Dark Lord had no part in my upbringing and couldn't touch my independence. Besides..." He hesitated, searching for hope. Strongly, he went on, "I know my--our--father was someone Ben Kenobi called friend, great pilot, and fine warrior. And if he's a part of us, we're a part of him. The Dark can't deny the Light."

"Well spoken," said Yoda. "Afraid for you I was when left here you did, yes. But now strong you are."

"Strength comes from knowledge too," said Leia, gently pulling away from Luke. She looked from the wizened Jedi Master to the evanescent shimmer of Kenobi's Force-spirit. "Tell us about...Anakin Skywalker. Tell us about our mother, and how we were separated. Tell us why you've shaped our lives the way you have and if you have any more plans for us. We must know."

Luke felt like applauding the princess' calm ultimatum, even while he wondered at her audacity in questioning the keepers of Jedi wisdom. He contented himself with smiling approvingly at his sister, and adding in a respectful inquiry of his own: "If Vader knows about me, is it possible he knows about Leia too?"

"We hope not," said Kenobi grimly. "I rue what secrets he has already won...forgive me. Habits die hard. I no longer have the luxury of indulging in regrets or secrets, do I?"

And so the story was told by Yoda and Obi-Wan Kenobi, of the pilot and warrior who'd emerged from the mundane, conservative aristocrats of Sith. A puzzle to his family he had been, a champion to his military comrades, a wonder to the remnants of the Jedi, and a terror to his foes in Palpatine's growing Empire. All that Anakin Skywalker sought became his, such was his brilliance and will to succeed.

But power guided Anakin Skywalker's life. His intentions were never wholly altruistic or wholly benevolent, since there were no lessons to point this young genius toward compassion for limitations or inability. He was totally alone; he felt himself supreme, in allunconscious arrogance, in a universe which seemed meant for his exploration and use.

Two events overwhelmed Anakin's twenty-seventh year: Evlyn and the coming of the Emperor. Evlyn Merrivel was a noblewoman and unknowing Force-sensitive at Palpatine's court when Anakin met her. Swiftly he learned love, which brought him the first measure of understanding of a part of the universe's pain and growth. But, so close to the Emperor's circle, he was discovered and wooed by the master of subtle lies and dark enchantments. Caught by the delights and throes of human love on the one side and love of might and mastery on the other, the Skywalker fell prey to Urgoth Palpatine. The Jedi Order died the day teacher and most brilliant student took the sides of light and dark against each other. The dark won, but at a price.

Evlyn escaped to Dagobah. After the birth of twins and strange, powerful portents of the children's differing paths in the Force, Evlyn gave up her son to Obi-Wan Kenobi and fled with her daughter to distant family on peaceful Alderaan. She died naturally, mourning Anakin. The children were protected. But for the father, nothing. No glimmer of life, no gleam of hope remained in the Force for the scarred black shapelessness that had once been the hope of the Jedi.

"And that is the story of Darth Vader, now Lord of the Sith and the Emperor's devoted servant," finished Kenobi.

"Possibly not so devoted," said Luke in a low voice. He cast a quick glance at Leia, hoping she wouldn't resent him for holding one or two secrets. "On Besper, my father claimed that I could destroy the Emperor. The Emperor had foreseen this, he said. He offered me training--power--his help in freeing the galaxy of conflict. He said that we could rule together...as father and son."

The universe narrowed to focus on Luke. He

bore the brunt of not only Leia's attention, but that of Yoda and Kenobi, and seemingly the eye of the Force as well. He set his jaw and raised his chin defiantly.

"And you alone in the realm of evil," Leia said softly, reaching out her fingers and caressing Luke's left hand. "No one to help you, or even recognize your bravery and strength. How did you withstand him? How could you not fall?"

Luke knew he'd never be able to convey to Leia the wave of relief and gratitude he felt at her compassionate kindness. What he thought of as his core of selfhood--the skills he'd won, his belief in friends and the endurance of life--blossomed. "But I *did* fall," he was able to say, ruefully. "It was my only way out, since I couldn't fight him. I fell right out of Cloud City."

She smiled. "That's not quite what I meant."

He returned her warmth. "I know."

"Such foresight has not been granted to either of us," said Kenobi, sounding both regretful and annoyed. "But I do not think Vader lied. It would be a powerful truth with which to snare you." Luke felt his teacher's presence come even closer, questing, searching his student's aura. "But you remained unsnared. Well done."

"He doesn't know me, or he'd have picked a much more effective temptation," replied Luke candidly. "I mean--'rule the galaxy'? I don't think I have the necessary egomania to enjoy that."

"Trust me, you wouldn't enjoy it," murmured Leia, and both of them laughed.

"The Emperor," commented Yoda, sighing and resting his chin on his staff. "Never have I been able to pierce the Forcefire that surrounds him; his fate and plans are concealed from me. Hmmm. Know I do, though, that bound by the Force you both, and your father, are to him. For good or ill."

"Teach us," said Luke urgently. "I at least have to face my father again; I feel it."

"I want to face him," interjected Leia. "And the Emperor must be destroyed if the rebellion is to succeed and the universe be renewed. Teach us."

The two masters of the Force looked to each other wide-eyed. "Stubborn," said Yoda, a smile betraying his feelings. "We will give you what teaching and help we can, young ones."

* * * * *

Just a touch of the show-off made Han Solo bring his **Falcon** in for a landing at Corell's main port at an angle and rate of descent calculated to terrify onlookers. At the last possible moment he leveled out, stalled, and allowed the ship to drop the remaining one meter to the ground.

"There are times I wish I'd never left the trees," rumbled his copilot.

Smiling complacently, Han shut down the console and stood up. "One of these days I'm gonna make a

landing upside down--on water--and then your fur'll really curl."

The Wookiee followed his captain out of the cockpit. "Are you glad to be home, in spite of the reason which called you here?"

Han paused in the central bay to put on his holster and tie it down. The tie-off was loose, even though secured on the last eyelet of the strap. He frowned at this, further evidence of the weight loss and other lingering side effects of his captivity. Picking up the jacket he'd slung over the back of the auxiliary station chair, the pilot gave the question his all-too sober consideration and finally divorced obligation and necessity from purely honest feelings. "Yeah, I guess so," he said. "You heading for the trees?"

"First I will take you to your family. But Malla knows I am coming."

"Give her a hug for me." Han lowered the exit ramp and sauntered down it. Once Chewie was out of the ship, the captain sealed her up so that no one could gain entry but himself or the Wookiee.

They went to one of the smaller docking bays and rented a sleek bubble-topped skyskiff. The Wookiee had to claim the entire back couch because of his size, and Han took the pilot's seat. He threw the main power switch and waited a moment until the engine's hum sped to a high whir, then took the craft skyward on a long banking curve.

Chewie was happily snuffling at the scents of his and Han's homeworld. "Even the air holds memories," he sighed. "The allure of home grows stronger each time that I am away. I only wish that you shared my gladness, Hearth-Brother."

"I'm trying," Han replied gloomily. He looked out of the skiff. They had left the port far behind, and were now over the forest which separated the sky-dwellers from the uninhabited wildlands. They were passing over the first of the aerial cities, a small one drifting lazily just above the treetops. The sight did nothing to raise his spirits. "I feel like I'm bein' pulled in six different directions. I wish I could've told Luke and Leia what's really goin' on. Maybe things wouldn't've gone so badly then--ah hell, it's too late for grousing. Just ignore me, Chewie, huh?"

"There will be time enough for explanations when the deed is done," growled Chewie. "If they are true friends, they will understand."

"First we gotta survive," countered Han. "Right now I got my doubts about that, too."

"I will take you to the Spice Hole tonight," stated Chewie, "and after you demolish a few others at sabacc you will feel much--" He broke off and vocalized an untranslatable, pleased bark, gesturing into the cloudless eastern sky. Han shaded his eyes and squinted. A familiar, large, many-towered sky-fortress could just be made out.

Solo breathed deeply, feeling a wave of adrenaline sweep through his bloodstream. Home. A pilot's home on a giant sky-faring vessel, a free-flying haven from the cold vacuum of space and from

the inexorable laws of gravity-bound earth. Home. Time to grieve; time to rest; time to take up arms and avenge his father's death.

After docking the ship in one of the bays located at the lowest level of the city, Han and the Wookiee headed for the lift that would take them up into its heights.

The lift took them up twenty levels in seconds. Pilot and partner stepped out onto the first business level--an array of shops and services that maintained the city's self-sufficiency--walked to the lift for the First Tower, and ascended again.

At the fortieth level they got out and were stopped. A Wookiee stepped into their path, started to protest their intrusion into private domains, then wuffed with surprised joy as he recognized Chewbacca. The two beasts hugged and growled at one another affectionately, and then Han was given a similar greeting.

Grinning, Solo disengaged himself as sinewy arms threatened to crack his ribs. "Thanks for the welcome--you're Shakra, aren't you? Tell Kiri Solo that her prodigal son has come home."

The brindled Wookiee stepped back and surveyed him with lively, critical sky-blue eyes. "You've been too long away, Young Master. You look in grave need of food and rest--has your hearth-brother not been treating you well?" He was interrupted by a defiant protest from Chewie, which he ignored. "Your mother is waiting to see you. She is in the east room."

"Thanks."

The east room was cool, now that the sun had passed on to the western sky. Han strode in, followed by the Wookiee, and small, friendly shadows stilled his steps and calmed his uneasiness.

A tall woman robed in tawny golds and browns got up from her seat by a window and came quickly toward her visitors, her hands reaching out to touch each of them. "Han. Chewbacca. Welcome home."

Han stepped forward and embraced his mother. A surfeit of emotion choked his voice for a moment; he clung to her tightly and then let go. He lowered his head to look into her serene, delicate-boned face. "I'm sorry I couldn't be here sooner. And I don't know how to say it any better than I'm sorry about Father, but sorrier still that you were left alone and burdened."

"I will miss Talwar," added the Wookiee. "May his life, and not his leaving, be remembered."

Kiri smiled at Chewbacca. "It is." Her brown eyes, set deep under straight brows, surveyed her son, drinking in the sight of him from toe to cowlick. "Han, what has happened? You look terrible."

"Jabba finally got the upper hand. My rebel friends set me free."

Her eyebrows arched. "Talwar had mentioned that you seemed to be a part of the anti-Imperial

effort, but both of us found that difficult to believe. You had never before shown any political leanings."

Chewbacca uttered a derisive hoot, and Han grinned. "I still don't show them, Mother. I'm only in it for the money."

"Money? With the rebels barely able to afford supplies and ships?" She laughed. "Couldn't you think of a better line than that?"

He tried to look sheepish. "Well, the rebellion sneaked up on me. You mean you haven't heard anything about what I've been doing?" He frowned as she shook her head. "My fault. I should have kept in touch."

She smiled up at him. "Don't berate yourself. You won your independence long ago; neither Talwar nor I would ever have intruded by checking up on your deeds. And Corell has kept itself separate, as always, even in this time of war. My knowledge of events and trends is limited to the Imperial court--because of Talwar's long battle with the Emperor." She turned aside and gestured toward the nearby stone windowseats. "Come and sit down. There's obviously a lot of news to catch up on."

Chewbacca interjected a questioning bark. "May I leave you to your privacy? The call of home is growing stronger."

"Of course," Kiri said graciously. "Thank you for coming up to the city. Bring your clan to visit, if you wish."

Chewie bowed his shaggy head. "Honor to you, Lady Kiri." He turned toward Han and growled affectionately. "You will come to the trees when you can?"

"When I can," Han promised. Once the Wookiee had left, he followed his mother to the nearest window and sat down facing her on the curved seat. "Mother--excuse me for being blunt--but how did Talwar die?"

She nodded gravely, as if in approval of his question. "It was very sudden. Talwar had a pre-cognition of the final battle to determine the fate of both Emperor and Empire. He went questing in the Force, trying to judge Palpatine's strengths and weaknesses. For the first time, his presence was sensed."

"How?"

"I don't know. Maybe the Emperor has grown in strength and skill--or maybe Talwar made a mistake." Kiri Solo faltered on the last word and looked down for a moment. "The Emperor tried to trap his mind. Your father chose dissolution in the Force, rather than succumb to enslavement." Her voice firmed. "No victory for Palpatine. All of Talwar's plans and hopes for the Force are still safe."

Dissolution. Voluntary abdication of life. Han shivered, thinking of Bespin. He had withstood Vader's ministrations, even managing to hide his heritage in the Force under a deliberate outpouring of all-too-vivid pain. He had submitted to the carbon-freeze without protest and without guarantee of survival--but none of that compared to Talwar's

sacrifice. When time came to confront the Emperor, and if the battle became hopeless, would he have the strength to choose suicide?

"Did Talwar pass on those plans to you?" Han asked intently. "I've always known that someday, I hoped with a lot of training from Father, that I'd try to kill Palpatine. Now I've got vengeance to add to my motivations. No matter what the cost, I'm going to do it--but I don't have the slightest idea of how. I'm a lousy swordsman, and I don't think a blaster would work on His Exaggerated Majesty. The Force isn't even awake in me yet--and Talwar's not here to bring it out. And where is the female Jedi who's supposed to complete the circle of Light against the Dark?"

"I don't know."

Han thrust out his chin and stared at his mother, trying to convince himself that he had heard incorrectly. As she looked at him inquiringly, a little ruefully, he breathed, "You...don't...know?"

She sat back and folded her hands together in her lap, her serenity seemingly unmarred by his agitation. "No."

Han had an instant's image of himself, Chewie, the **Falcon**, the entire galaxy falling irretrievably into a black hole. "You don't know any of Father's schemes?" he asked plaintively.

"No." She added helpfully, "Talwar and I agreed that it would be too dangerous."

"Great. How the hell am I supposed to--" Han remembered who he was talking to and lowered his voice. "Then how am I supposed to fight the Emperor?"

"Ask Talwar."

Her son stiffened. "That's not funny," he said curtly.

The amusement in her expression quickly gave way to contrition and alarm. She reached out to grasp her hands. "Oh Han, I'm sorry. I forgot how little you were taught. Talwar's spirit--soul, ego, call it what you would--is a part of the Force. A Forceuser cannot be wholly destroyed save by some formidable power that would sunder mind and body and then annihilate each. Your father is alive in the Force, Han."

Han opened his mouth, then closed it again when he couldn't think of anything appropriate to say. Suddenly all of Luke's crazy comments about Ben Kenobi made sense.

His mother smiled at him. "Now you understand why I do not grieve overmuch."

He let out a long breath. "Yeah. But...well, how do I--you know--talk to him?"

"You must win your Cadar heritage."

The mountain range was vast, a curve rimming the horizon's circle. Its peaks were mighty, the highest of them spearing through the fitful clouds.

Waves upon waves of sky-climbing hills rolled across the landscape, even the valleys interrupted by smaller crests. And, on each hillock, rise and slope was imprinted a myriad of faces.

Han stood in a valley, his feet carefully positioned between two faces. Though illusion they might be, he didn't care to step on them. A cold wind, that changed direction from moment to moment, whipped at his hair and ruffled his shirt. It all felt surprisingly real. He wondered if he should treat it as reality, or remain confident that this place was merely an illusion of the Force.

Tentatively, he raised one booted toe and cautiously touched what appeared to be the chin of an alien face right in front of him. The face's eyes blinked, and Han stood poised, hardly daring to move. Then, staring with grim curiosity at the seemingly living visage, he put his foot back down in its former, safe spot.

'What the hell am I supposed to do now?' Kiri had shown him how to open himself to the Force. Somewhere in this trackless expanse, somehow in this world of real illusions, he had to win his strength in the Force and find the shade of Talwar Solo. His mother had called this place the Wellspring, the Force's own dimension of life-flow and change. All those living and dead had a niche here; the faces he saw were probably those strong enough in the Force to leave behind impressions of their selves.

He had always known about the current of the Force; not as Luke knew it, probably, and certainly not as old Obi-Wan Kenobi had known it. Han couldn't view it as destiny or a form of guiding power...unless one viewed all of life that way. The fact that one's life was determined by heredity and circumstances was a form of destiny, he supposed. He preferred to think of the Force as the wild card in the life-game, the unpredictable circumstance which sometimes acted on one, or which could sometimes be acted upon.

As his need to move was becoming acute, Han slowly and carefully began to pick a path through the demented landscape. Fifty feet at a glacier's pace convinced him that walking wouldn't work. On a whim, he thought about skimming a few feet above the surface, and, to his gratified surprise, found himself doing so effortlessly, naturally. Human and alien species of every description stared up at him, their attention seemingly focusing on his passage. They did nothing--perhaps because his presence, for the moment, made such a negligible ripple in the Forceflow.

The talent had been dormant in him--largely by his own doing, since he had pursued a life deliberately free of responsibility for other people's actions. That was the main problem with the Force, as he saw it: accept its possibilities, and you were stuck with far more power--and its consequences--than any one individual should bear. Every deed suddenly acquired ramifications which made action difficult, sometimes near-impossible. Who wanted the role of a god? Not he.

'So why am I doing this?' he wondered. 'Nobody's asking you to take on the Emperor, Solo. Nobody's asking you to do anything. Go back to bein' a free-trader. Better yet, go back to the Alliance. Find Leia, Luke. Pretend you never

wanted to do anything more than run a few tricky missions for some rebel friends. You miss them, don't you? They could use your help. Leia would welcome you back, might forgive you--"

"Shut up," said Han out loud. He concentrated on where he was. He needed to find his outlet in the Force, discover a way to unblock all his defenses and begin to see. He needed to know what strengths the Force could give him and how to wield them.

His focus appeared to alter the terrain. He was abruptly deep in a translucent cavern, strings of lights behind the walls creating the impression of glowing rivers of amber fire. The walls were crystalline, multi-faceted; some were etched with designs and scenes of delicate beauty. Han felt as if he should know where he was. This seemed like an actual place in his world of time and three-dimensional space, not some creation of the Force-world.

Han stalked, silent as a breeze, down a hallway. He caught occasional echoes of himself in the polished crystal, and he could feel the pearl-white floor at every footstep. This felt all too real. Up ahead the corridor separated into two branches, one leading down a wide flight of marble stairs, the other disappearing off to the right.

He approached the corner and looked around cautiously, then pulled back quickly. The corridor opened into a hall vaster than a starport's sprawl, filled with Imperial officers and stormtroopers undergoing military review. Not that way, then. He slipped past the entryway and went toward the stairs, only to be stopped by an imperative call of unknown danger rising from the unseen depths. He paused, uncertain, then made his choice and began softly sidestepping down the stairway.

Four corridors waited like mouths at the bottom. Refusing to hesitate any longer, Han resolutely headed into the one to the farthest right. It branched into three passageways, all seemingly a little narrower and a little lower. He took the left-hand branch. It cleft into two dark tunnels. He strode down the left-hand one, but felt tension and irritation rising at this architectural fickleness.

The tunnel went on and on. Its walls were still crystal, but they were clouded and smoky now, as if the light was very far and the substance marred by indwelling darkness. Abruptly, the hall ran out, the pathway gathering and closing itself up in a circular, jewel-like end. A dead end. As Han turned around, the tunnel closed itself in front of him, crystal planes unfolding and shutting tight with seamless perfection.

Astounded, Han senselessly raised his fists and struck at the translucent wall. It was hard and cold.

He drew his blaster and fired at where he'd seen the last fissure disappear. The charge ricocheted back at him; only an instantaneous swerve saved him from being burned. But he didn't remember in time that all the walls would be equally unyielding. He cried out and staggered against a crystal plane as the bolt, rebounding again, drilled into the back of his right shoulder. He dropped his

weapon and hung onto the wall, breathing raggedly and cursing himself for a clonewitted idiot.

Laughter resounded behind him. He wheeled around. There stood a wizened little human in blue-black robes, pointing a finger at Solo and cackling nastily. Not handsome, not imposing, not impressive, not anything more than a dried-up husk of a man. The Emperor of the Galactic Empire--who looked much better on all the military posters and propaganda holo-vids.

Han didn't like being laughed at by anyone. Holding his right arm tight against his side and trying to ignore the pain, he lunged down toward his blaster. Before he could reach it, blue-white fire crackled from the Emperor's right hand, striking his weapon and making it disappear in a flash of blue flame.

"You could not touch me with that pathetic little toy," mocked the despot in a rich baritone only marred by its harshness. "I cannot be destroyed, especially by one such as you. You have no power against me." He raised both hands, and lightning-bolts leaped out. There was nowhere to duck or flee. In desperation, the Corellian flung up his hands as a shield in the path of the dark power crackling toward him. The bolts struck his palms--harmlessly, vanishing into a second skin of glowing energy that was suddenly there for his protection.

Astonishment was replaced by glee. "Are you so sure about that?" countered Han. "Try again, Your Arrogance."

The Emperor had hesitated, as though suddenly unsure of his foe and the fight's outcome. Then he snarled and attacked again.

Like the first time he'd tried to land a malfunctioning, aged freighter, like the first time he'd made the obstacle-fraught Kessel Run, Han felt slightly scared exhilaration sweep through him. Trusting to instinct and luck, he raised his hands and shouted. Gold flame leaped from fingertip to fingertip, then between his hands, creating a web of fire that was both shield and weapon. It met the Emperor's lightning and absorbed it, then uncurled toward the dark Cadar like a blaze streaking along a river of oil. As it struck, enveloping the Emperor in pale-gold fire, he disappeared.

"What the--" Han spun around, expecting assault from some new quarter. He saw no one but himself, reflected endlessly in the crystal trap.

He suddenly realized that his right shoulder no longer gave him any pain. He reached behind with his left hand and felt only his tunic and shirt, both whole and unburned. Had he healed himself, or had the injury been an illusion of some mysterious purpose?

Immaterial questions, at the moment. He circled slowly, studying the walls. Now combined with the need to get out was the fear that the Emperor--or some new enemy--would emerge.

"If the Emperor can get out, so can I," Han stated out loud. He hated prisons, hated to see anyone locked up in one. He might not have been court-martialed out of the Imperial Star Fleet if he

Luke wanted to pull back his hand, but the power of Yoda's vibrant Force aura held it in gentle captivity, making the young man ever more aware of the hand's lack of life and the Force. He looked at Leia, who gazed at him compassionately and voiced the desire he was feeling just then. "Ask him, Luke."

He faltered for a moment, knowing that never again would he be able to live on the seesaw of belief or disbelief. But ignorance had almost killed him on Bespin, and he would not seek that form of darkness for any reason. "Master Yoda, I need to know," he said. "Is my father Anakin Skywalker...or Darth Vader?"

Yoda let go of Luke's hand, and Luke felt it ache and throb, reminding him of the way his living hand had felt during his lightsaber duel. "Both," the small being said simply.

Luke drew in a deep breath, hardly feeling Leia's comforting touch on his left arm. The confirmation was less upsetting than he'd expected; he'd known, all along, deep down, that it was the truth. "How?" he asked violently. "Ben told me--" He looked up for a moment, half hoping to hear or feel Kenobi. "Ben told me Vader murdered my father."

"So literal you are," Yoda replied soberly. "Obi-Wan wished Skywalker's children to be innocent."

"And too wrapped in his own hurt and shame was Obi-Wan," said a familiar, weary, courtly voice. It came from the air between Luke and Yoda, eliciting a wondering gasp from Leia and a conflicting mixture of hope and resentment in Luke. "I trained Anakin Skywalker. The pain and damage of his fall I could not pass on to you, Luke. I did not see that your destinies would be so closely intertwined."

His teacher's fallibility was a new and uncomfortable concept for the young Jedi, but easier to accept than the thought of a deliberate lie. Luke could not even guess at the necessities of the past. Nor did he have the right to judge Kenobi's actions--which had been, intrinsically, on his behalf. He tried to think about his father as the ebon-cloaked death-image from Bespin, but the two refused to merge. "He didn't know either, did he? About me, I mean."

"No," admitted Kenobi. Luke believed he could trace in the air the faint blue and white shimmer of his master's age- and sorrow-graven face. "I don't know how he finally found out."

"No time remains for mysteries," murmured Yoda. "Innocence long-sheltered now must claim its full inheritance."

The air was filled with an old man's sigh. "Am I still too much of a fool, my Master, to wish for simplicity? Luke, Princess Leia, I ask for your forgiveness. Our twin hopes you were, brought up apart, raised in families that--we hoped--cared for your souls and not your lineage. You are Prince and Princess of the Sith, children of Anakin and Evlyn, Luke and Leia Skywalker, born here on Dagobah."

Newfound brother and sister turned to each other instinctively, shock and the transfiguration



of a long-forged bond of friendship drawing them together. Wide brown eyes stared into sky-blue ones, searching for a way to make the abrupt, undoubted reality a comfort and a strength.

"My brother?" Leia ventured, her mouth carefully shaping the sounds. She smiled suddenly. "I always wanted one, too."

Luke took her hands in his. "That's a much better surprise than the last one I got. No wonder I've always felt--" He paused, realizing the ramifications of their new relationship. He finished simply. "I've always felt close to you. I love you, Leia. I hope you'll let me say that to you now."

Her dignity fell away, her expression and presence opening toward him in a glow of vibrancy that perhaps only Han Solo had ever glimpsed before. Then she turned toward the ancient Jedi Master, her manner poised and deadly with burgeoning emotions. "Darth Vader has been my enemy all my life," she stated. "And I went through all the questions and doubts that any adopted child undergoes. Now I discover that one of my truest friends could have been even closer to me. I don't believe in innocence, Master Yoda, Master Kenobi. There are joys in knowledge as well as sorrows."

"Too late it is to change the past," said Yoda. "To the present and future you must look. Hope I do, that knowledge of your birth and legacy will bring you more joy than pain."

Leia's gaze dropped before his dispassionate honesty. "Vader," she whispered, and a shudder passed through her. She felt Luke's arm encircle her shoulders, and she leaned toward him.

Luke's grasp tightened around his sister's shoulders as he shared with her her swing from hope to fear, from release and relief to dread of obligation. Strongly aware of her feelings, he admitted to gladness that he had a claim to her through kinship, since he had long been aware of how much she felt for the Corellian spacer. He could share with her now, could protect her, could start to rebuild a family closeness they had each lost.

"Leia," Luke said softly, "when I told you about Vader's claim, you reminded me that the Dark Lord had no part in my upbringing and couldn't touch my independence. Besides..." He hesitated, searching for hope. Strongly, he went on, "I know my--our--father was someone Ben Kenobi called friend, great pilot, and fine warrior. And if he's a part of us, we're a part of him. The Dark can't deny the Light."

"Well spoken," said Yoda. "Afraid for you I was when left here you did, yes. But now strong you are."

"Strength comes from knowledge too," said Leia, gently pulling away from Luke. She looked from the wizened Jedi Master to the evanescent shimmer of Kenobi's Force-spirit. "Tell us about...Anakin Skywalker. Tell us about our mother, and how we were separated. Tell us why you've shaped our lives the way you have and if you have any more plans for us. We must know."

Luke felt like applauding the princess' calm ultimatum, even while he wondered at her audacity in questioning the keepers of Jedi wisdom. He contented himself with smiling approvingly at his sister, and adding in a respectful inquiry of his own: "If Vader knows about me, is it possible he knows about Leia too?"

"We hope not," said Kenobi grimly. "I rue what secrets he has already won...forgive me. Habits die hard. I no longer have the luxury of indulging in regrets or secrets, do I?"

And so the story was told by Yoda and Obi-Wan Kenobi, of the pilot and warrior who'd emerged from the mundane, conservative aristocrats of Sith. A puzzle to his family he had been, a champion to his military comrades, a wonder to the remnants of the Jedi, and a terror to his foes in Palpatine's growing Empire. All that Anakin Skywalker sought became his, such was his brilliance and will to succeed.

But power guided Anakin Skywalker's life. His intentions were never wholly altruistic or wholly benevolent, since there were no lessons to point this young genius toward compassion for limitations or inability. He was totally alone; he felt himself supreme, in all unconscious arrogance, in a universe which seemed meant for his exploration and use.

Two events overwhelmed Anakin's twenty-seventh year: Evlyn and the coming of the Emperor. Evlyn Merrivel was a noblewoman and unknowing Force-sensitive at Palpatine's court when Anakin met her. Swiftly he learned love, which brought him the first measure of understanding of a part of the universe's pain and growth. But, so close to the Emperor's circle, he was discovered and wooed by the master of subtle lies and dark enchantments. Caught by the delights and throes of human love on the one side and love of might and mastery on the other, the Skywalker fell prey to Urgoth Palpatine. The Jedi Order died the day teacher and most brilliant student took the sides of light and dark against each other. The dark won, but at a price.

Evlyn escaped to Dagobah. After the birth of twins and strange, powerful portents of the children's differing paths in the Force, Evlyn gave up her son to Obi-Wan Kenobi and fled with her daughter to distant family on peaceful Alderaan. She died naturally, mourning Anakin. The children were protected. But for the father, nothing. No glimmer of life, no gleam of hope remained in the Force for the scarred black shapelessness that had once been the hope of the Jedi.

"And that is the story of Darth Vader, now Lord of the Sith and the Emperor's devoted servant," finished Kenobi.

"Possibly not so devoted," said Luke in a low voice. He cast a quick glance at Leia, hoping she wouldn't resent him for holding one or two secrets. "On Bespin, my father claimed that I could destroy the Emperor. The Emperor had foreseen this, he said. He offered me training--power--his help in freeing the galaxy of conflict. He said that we could rule together...as father and son."

The universe narrowed to focus on Luke. He

bore the brunt of not only Leia's attention, but that of Yoda and Kenobi, and seemingly the eye of the Force as well. He set his jaw and raised his chin defiantly.

"And you alone in the realm of evil," Leia said softly, reaching out her fingers and caressing Luke's left hand. "No one to help you, or even recognize your bravery and strength. How did you withstand him? How could you not fall?"

Luke knew he'd never be able to convey to Leia the wave of relief and gratitude he felt at her compassionate kindness. What he thought of as his core of selfhood--the skills he'd won, his belief in friends and the endurance of life--blossomed. "But I did fall," he was able to say, ruefully. "It was my only way out, since I couldn't fight him. I fell right out of Cloud City."

She smiled. "That's not quite what I meant."

He returned her warmth. "I know."

"Such foresight has not been granted to either of us," said Kenobi, sounding both regretful and annoyed. "But I do not think Vader lied. It would be a powerful truth with which to snare you." Luke felt his teacher's presence come even closer, questing, searching his student's aura. "But you remained unsnared. Well done."

"He doesn't know me, or he'd have picked a much more effective temptation," replied Luke candidly. "I mean--'rule the galaxy'? I don't think I have the necessary egomania to enjoy that."

"Trust me, you wouldn't enjoy it," murmured Leia, and both of them laughed.

"The Emperor," commented Yoda, sighing and resting his chin on his staff. "Never have I been able to pierce the Forcefire that surrounds him; his fate and plans are concealed from me. Hmmm. Know I do, though, that bound by the Force you both, and your father, are to him. For good or ill."

"Teach us," said Luke urgently. "I at least have to face my father again; I feel it."

"I want to face him," interjected Leia. "And the Emperor must be destroyed if the rebellion is to succeed and the universe be renewed. Teach us."

The two masters of the Force looked to each other wide-eyed. "Stubborn," said Yoda, a smile betraying his feelings. "We will give you what teaching and help we can, young ones."

* * * * *

Just a touch of the show-off made Han Solo bring his **Falcon** in for a landing at Corell's main port at an angle and rate of descent calculated to terrify onlookers. At the last possible moment he leveled out, stalled, and allowed the ship to drop the remaining one meter to the ground.

"There are times I wish I'd never left the trees," rumbled his copilot.

Smiling complacently, Han shut down the console and stood up. "One of these days I'm gonna make a

landing upside down--on water--and then your fur'll really curl."

The Wookiee followed his captain out of the cockpit. "Are you glad to be home, in spite of the reason which called you here?"

Han paused in the central bay to put on his holster and tie it down. The tie-off was loose, even though secured on the last eyelet of the strap. He frowned at this, further evidence of the weight loss and other lingering side effects of his captivity. Picking up the jacket he'd slung over the back of the auxiliary station chair, the pilot gave the question his all-too sober consideration and finally divorced obligation and necessity from purely honest feelings. "Yeah, I guess so," he said. "You heading for the trees?"

"First I will take you to your family. But Malla knows I am coming."

"Give her a hug for me." Han lowered the exit ramp and sauntered down it. Once Chewie was out of the ship, the captain sealed her up so that no one could gain entry but himself or the Wookiee.

They went to one of the smaller docking bays and rented a sleek bubble-topped skyskiff. The Wookiee had to claim the entire back couch because of his size, and Han took the pilot's seat. He threw the main power switch and waited a moment until the engine's hum sped to a high whir, then took the craft skyward on a long banking curve.

Chewie was happily snuffling at the scents of his and Han's homeworld. "Even the air holds memories," he sighed. "The allure of home grows stronger each time that I am away. I only wish that you shared my gladness, Hearth-Brother."

"I'm trying," Han replied gloomily. He looked out of the skiff. They had left the port far behind, and were now over the forest which separated the sky-dwellers from the uninhabited wildlands. They were passing over the first of the aerial cities, a small one drifting lazily just above the treetops. The sight did nothing to raise his spirits. "I feel like I'm bein' pulled in six different directions. I wish I could've told Luke and Leia what's really goin' on. Maybe things wouldn't've gone so badly then--ah hell, it's too late for grousing. Just ignore me, Chewie, huh?"

"There will be time enough for explanations when the deed is done," growled Chewie. "If they are true friends, they will understand."

"First we gotta survive," countered Han. "Right now I got my doubts about that, too."

"I will take you to the Spice Hole tonight," stated Chewie, "and after you demolish a few others at sabacc you will feel much--" He broke off and vocalized an untranslatable, pleased bark, gesturing into the cloudless eastern sky. Han shaded his eyes and squinted. A familiar, large, many-towered sky-fortress could just be made out.

Solo breathed deeply, feeling a wave of adrenaline sweep through his bloodstream. Home. A pilot's home on a giant sky-faring vessel, a free-flying haven from the cold vacuum of space and from

the inexorable laws of gravity-bound earth. Home. Time to grieve; time to rest; time to take up arms and avenge his father's death.

After docking the ship in one of the bays located at the lowest level of the city, Han and the Wookiee headed for the lift that would take them up into its heights.

The lift took them up twenty levels in seconds. Pilot and partner stepped out onto the first business level--an array of shops and services that maintained the city's self-sufficiency--walked to the lift for the First Tower, and ascended again.

At the fortieth level they got out and were stopped. A Wookiee stepped into their path, started to protest their intrusion into private domains, then wuffled with surprised joy as he recognized Chewbacca. The two beasts hugged and growled at one another affectionately, and then Han was given a similar greeting.

Grinning, Solo disengaged himself as sinewy arms threatened to crack his ribs. "Thanks for the welcome--you're Shakra, aren't you? Tell Kiri Solo that her prodigal son has come home."

The brindled Wookiee stepped back and surveyed him with lively, critical sky-blue eyes. "You've been too long away, Young Master. You look in grave need of food and rest--has your hearth-brother not been treating you well?" He was interrupted by a defiant protest from Chewie, which he ignored. "Your mother is waiting to see you. She is in the east room."

"Thanks."

The east room was cool, now that the sun had passed on to the western sky. Han strode in, followed by the Wookiee, and small, friendly shadows stilled his steps and calmed his uneasiness.

A tall woman robed in tawny golds and browns got up from her seat by a window and came quickly toward her visitors, her hands reaching out to touch each of them. "Han. Chewbacca. Welcome home."

Han stepped forward and embraced his mother. A surfeit of emotion choked his voice for a moment; he clung to her tightly and then let go. He lowered his head to look into her serene, delicate-boned face. "I'm sorry I couldn't be here sooner. And I don't know how to say it any better than I'm sorry about Father, but sorrier still that you were left alone and burdened."

"I will miss Talwar," added the Wookiee. "May his life, and not his leaving, be remembered."

Kiri smiled at Chewbacca. "It is." Her brown eyes, set deep under straight brows, surveyed her son, drinking in the sight of him from toe to cowlick. "Han, what has happened? You look terrible."

"Jabba finally got the upper hand. My rebel friends set me free."

Her eyebrows arched. "Talwar had mentioned that you seemed to be a part of the anti-Imperial

effort, but both of us found that difficult to believe. You had never before shown any political leanings."

Chewbacca uttered a derisive hoot, and Han grinned. "I still don't show them, Mother. I'm only in it for the money."

"Money? With the rebels barely able to afford supplies and ships?" She laughed. "Couldn't you think of a better line than that?"

He tried to look sheepish. "Well, the rebellion sneaked up on me. You mean you haven't heard anything about what I've been doing?" He frowned as she shook her head. "My fault. I should have kept in touch."

She smiled up at him. "Don't berate yourself. You won your independence long ago; neither Talwar nor I would ever have intruded by checking up on your deeds. And Corell has kept itself separate, as always, even in this time of war. My knowledge of events and trends is limited to the Imperial court--because of Talwar's long battle with the Emperor." She turned aside and gestured toward the nearby stone windowseats. "Come and sit down. There's obviously a lot of news to catch up on."

Chewbacca interjected a questioning bark. "May I leave you to your privacy? The call of home is growing stronger."

"Of course," Kiri said graciously. "Thank you for coming up to the city. Bring your clan to visit, if you wish."

Chewie bowed his shaggy head. "Honor to you, Lady Kiri." He turned toward Han and growled affectionately. "You will come to the trees when you can?"

"When I can," Han promised. Once the Wookiee had left, he followed his mother to the nearest window and sat down facing her on the curved seat. "Mother--excuse me for being blunt--but how did Talwar die?"

She nodded gravely, as if in approval of his question. "It was very sudden. Talwar had a pre-cognition of the final battle to determine the fate of both Emperor and Empire. He went questing in the Force, trying to judge Palpatine's strengths and weaknesses. For the first time, his presence was sensed."

"How?"

"I don't know. Maybe the Emperor has grown in strength and skill--or maybe Talwar made a mistake." Kiri Solo faltered on the last word and looked down for a moment. "The Emperor tried to trap his mind. Your father chose dissolution in the Force, rather than succumb to enslavement." Her voice firmed. "No victory for Palpatine. All of Talwar's plans and hopes for the Force are still safe."

Dissolution. Voluntary abdication of life. Han shivered, thinking of Bespin. He had withstood Vader's ministrations, even managing to hide his heritage in the Force under a deliberate outpouring of all-too-vivid pain. He had submitted to the carbon-freeze without protest and without guarantee of survival--but none of that compared to Talwar's

sacrifice. When time came to confront the Emperor, and if the battle became hopeless, would he have the strength to choose suicide?

"Did Talwar pass on those plans to you?" Han asked intently. "I've always known that someday, I hoped with a lot of training from Father, that I'd try to kill Palpatine. Now I've got vengeance to add to my motivations. No matter what the cost, I'm going to do it--but I don't have the slightest idea of how. I'm a lousy swordsman, and I don't think a blaster would work on His Exaggerated Majesty. The Force isn't even awake in me yet--and Talwar's not here to bring it out. And where is the female Jedi who's supposed to complete the circle of Light against the Dark?"

"I don't know."

Han thrust out his chin and stared at his mother, trying to convince himself that he had heard incorrectly. As she looked at him inquiringly, a little ruefully, he breathed, "You...don't...know?"

She sat back and folded her hands together in her lap, her serenity seemingly unmarred by his agitation. "No."

Han had an instant's image of himself, Chewie, the **Falcon**, the entire galaxy falling irretrievably into a black hole. "You don't know any of Father's schemes?" he asked plaintively.

"No." She added helpfully, "Talwar and I agreed that it would be too dangerous."

"Great. How the hell am I supposed to--" Han remembered who he was talking to and lowered his voice. "Then how am I supposed to fight the Emperor?"

"Ask Talwar."

Her son stiffened. "That's not funny," he said curtly.

The amusement in her expression quickly gave way to contrition and alarm. She reached out to grasp her hands. "Oh Han, I'm sorry. I forgot how little you were taught. Talwar's spirit--soul, ego, call it what you would--is a part of the Force. A Forceuser cannot be wholly destroyed save by some formidable power that would sunder mind and body and then annihilate each. Your father is alive in the Force, Han."

Han opened his mouth, then closed it again when he couldn't think of anything appropriate to say. Suddenly all of Luke's crazy comments about Ben Kenobi made sense.

His mother smiled at him. "Now you understand why I do not grieve overmuch."

He let out a long breath. "Yeah. But...well, how do I--you know--talk to him?"

"You must win your Cadar heritage."

The mountain range was vast, a curve rimming the horizon's circle. Its peaks were mighty, the highest of them spearing through the fitful clouds.

Waves upon waves of sky-climbing hills rolled across the landscape, even the valleys interrupted by smaller crests. And, on each hillock, rise and slope was imprinted a myriad of faces.

Han stood in a valley, his feet carefully positioned between two faces. Though illusion they might be, he didn't care to step on them. A cold wind, that changed direction from moment to moment, whipped at his hair and ruffled his shirt. It all felt surprisingly real. He wondered if he should treat it as reality, or remain confident that this place was merely an illusion of the Force.

Tentatively, he raised one booted toe and cautiously touched what appeared to be the chin of an alien face right in front of him. The face's eyes blinked, and Han stood poised, hardly daring to move. Then, staring with grim curiosity at the seemingly living visage, he put his foot back down in its former, safe spot.

'What the hell am I supposed to do now?' Kiri had shown him how to open himself to the Force. Somewhere in this trackless expanse, somehow in this world of real illusions, he had to win his strength in the Force and find the shade of Talwar Solo. His mother had called this place the Wellspring, the Force's own dimension of life-flow and change. All those living and dead had a niche here; the faces he saw were probably those strong enough in the Force to leave behind impressions of their selves.

He had always known about the current of the Force; not as Luke knew it, probably, and certainly not as old Obi-Wan Kenobi had known it. Han couldn't view it as destiny or a form of guiding power...unless one viewed all of life that way. The fact that one's life was determined by heredity and circumstances was a form of destiny, he supposed. He preferred to think of the Force as the wild card in the life-game, the unpredictable circumstance which sometimes acted on one, or which could sometimes be acted upon.

As his need to move was becoming acute, Han slowly and carefully began to pick a path through the demented landscape. Fifty feet at a glacier's pace convinced him that walking wouldn't work. On a whim, he thought about skimming a few feet above the surface, and, to his gratified surprise, found himself doing so effortlessly, naturally. Human and alien species of every description stared up at him, their attention seemingly focusing on his passage. They did nothing--perhaps because his presence, for the moment, made such a negligible ripple in the Forceflow.

The talent had been dormant in him--largely by his own doing, since he had pursued a life deliberately free of responsibility for other people's actions. That was the main problem with the Force, as he saw it: accept its possibilities, and you were stuck with far more power--and its consequences--than any one individual should bear. Every deed suddenly acquired ramifications which made action difficult, sometimes near-impossible. Who wanted the role of a god? Not he.

'So why am I doing this?' he wondered. 'Nobody's asking you to take on the Emperor, Solo. Nobody's asking you to do anything. Go back to bein' a free-trader. Better yet, go back to the Alliance. Find Leia, Luke. Pretend you never

wanted to do anything more than run a few tricky missions for some rebel friends. You miss them, don't you? They could use your help. Leia would welcome you back, might forgive you--'

"Shut up," said Han out loud. He concentrated on where he was. He needed to find his outlet in the Force, discover a way to unblock all his defenses and begin to see. He needed to know what strengths the Force could give him and how to wield them.

His focus appeared to alter the terrain. He was abruptly deep in a translucent cavern, strings of lights behind the walls creating the impression of glowing rivers of amber fire. The walls were crystalline, multi-faceted; some were etched with designs and scenes of delicate beauty. Han felt as if he should know where he was. This seemed like an actual place in his world of time and three-dimensional space, not some creation of the Force-world.

Han stalked, silent as a breeze, down a hallway. He caught occasional echoes of himself in the polished crystal, and he could feel the pearl-white floor at every footstep. This felt all too real. Up ahead the corridor separated into two branches, one leading down a wide flight of marble stairs, the other disappearing off to the right.

He approached the corner and looked around cautiously, then pulled back quickly. The corridor opened into a hall vaster than a starport's sprawl, filled with Imperial officers and stormtroopers undergoing military review. Not that way, then. He slipped past the entryway and went toward the stairs, only to be stopped by an imperative call of unknown danger rising from the unseen depths. He paused, uncertain, then made his choice and began softly sidestepping down the stairway.

Four corridors waited like mouths at the bottom. Refusing to hesitate any longer, Han resolutely headed into the one to the farthest right. It branched into three passageways, all seemingly a little narrower and a little lower. He took the left-hand branch. It cleft into two dark tunnels. He strode down the left-hand one, but felt tension and irritation rising at this architectural fickleness.

The tunnel went on and on. Its walls were still crystal, but they were clouded and smoky now, as if the light was very far and the substance marred by indwelling darkness. Abruptly, the hall ran out, the pathway gathering and closing itself up in a circular, jewel-like end. A dead end. As Han turned around, the tunnel closed itself in front of him, crystal planes unfolding and shutting tight with seamless perfection.

Astounded, Han senselessly raised his fists and struck at the translucent wall. It was hard and cold.

He drew his blaster and fired at where he'd seen the last fissure disappear. The charge ricocheted back at him; only an instantaneous swerve saved him from being burned. But he didn't remember in time that all the walls would be equally unyielding. He cried out and staggered against a crystal plane as the bolt, rebounding again, drilled into the back of his right shoulder. He dropped his

weapon and hung onto the wall, breathing raggedly and cursing himself for a clonewitted idiot.

Laughter resounded behind him. He wheeled around. There stood a wizened little human in blue-black robes, pointing a finger at Solo and cackling nastily. Not handsome, not imposing, not impressive, not anything more than a dried-up husk of a man. The Emperor of the Galactic Empire--who looked much better on all the military posters and propaganda holo-vids.

Han didn't like being laughed at by anyone. Holding his right arm tight against his side and trying to ignore the pain, he lunged down toward his blaster. Before he could reach it, blue-white fire crackled from the Emperor's right hand, striking his weapon and making it disappear in a flash of blue flame.

"You could not touch me with that pathetic little toy," mocked the despot in a rich baritone only marred by its harshness. "I cannot be destroyed, especially by one such as you. You have no power against me." He raised both hands, and lightning-bolts leaped out. There was nowhere to duck or flee. In desperation, the Corellian flung up his hands as a shield in the path of the dark power crackling toward him. The bolts struck his palms--harmlessly, vanishing into a second skin of glowing energy that was suddenly there for his protection.

Astonishment was replaced by glee. "Are you so sure about that?" countered Han. "Try again, Your Arrogance."

The Emperor had hesitated, as though suddenly unsure of his foe and the fight's outcome. Then he snarled and attacked again.

Like the first time he'd tried to land a malfunctioning, aged freighter, like the first time he'd made the obstacle-fraught Kessel Run, Han felt slightly scared exhilaration sweep through him. Trusting to instinct and luck, he raised his hands and shouted. Gold flame leaped from fingertip to fingertip, then between his hands, creating a web of fire that was both shield and weapon. It met the Emperor's lightning and absorbed it, then uncurled toward the dark Cadar like a blaze streaking along a river of oil. As it struck, enveloping the Emperor in pale-gold fire, he disappeared.

"What the--" Han spun around, expecting assault from some new quarter. He saw no one but himself, reflected endlessly in the crystal trap.

He suddenly realized that his right shoulder no longer gave him any pain. He reached behind with his left hand and felt only his tunic and shirt, both whole and unburned. Had he healed himself, or had the injury been an illusion of some mysterious purpose?

Immaterial questions, at the moment. He circled slowly, studying the walls. Now combined with the need to get out was the fear that the Emperor--or some new enemy--would emerge.

"If the Emperor can get out, so can I," Han stated out loud. He hated prisons, hated to see anyone locked up in one. He might not have been court-martialed out of the Imperial Star Fleet if he



hadn't skipped detention for minor flagrantries at least twenty times. A blink and a shift in light caught the corner of his eye, and he pivoted. Nothing there--or had the number of facets increased? He seemed to be seeing even more of himself--a pleasant enough view, he supposed, but boring.

The slavers on Kashyyk had used pens something like this one--energy fields that caught and refracted the light oddly. The last time Han had seen them, they had been full of infuriated, panicking Wookiees. At the time, Wookiees had meant nothing to him, but the sight and feel of so many trapped, sentient beasts had driven him wild. He had proceeded to break the slave ring once and for all. Now the Solo family and the Errawshiur clan were hearth-kin, and Han and Chewie would go out of their way to set anything free from captivity--

Han looked up quickly, his reverie broken, as the polyhedron of planes overhead became a millifaceted, glittering surface. What was happening? He tensed at the changes, frustrated at his inability to do anything. Abruptly, the wall in front of him refaceted itself. None of the planes of the trap were bigger than his palm now, and the refraction of light around and across the chamber was chaotic, mind-fogging.

"Let me out of here!" The ceiling seemed to come rushing down, and Han flung up his hands in an instinctive effort to protect himself. Nothing happened--but his cage now appeared smaller. Not the slightest crack or indication of an exit was visible. Was this how Talwar had felt, caught in a trap with nothing to fight? The walls seemed a little closer, and Han was reminded of the trash compactor on the **Death Star**.

"There's no way out but death," whispered a voice in his mind. "You're choosing suicide, going to battle the Emperor. No one has ever come close to defeating him. You thought you had a purpose--it was nothing but a trap."

Han recognized the words as a vocalization of his swelling futility and fear. But he had to fight the Emperor, even if it cost him his life. All his life he'd known of the subtle war waged by Jedi and Cadar against Palpatine, and all his life he'd known that someday, he, too, would come into his Force-inheritance. But never had Talwar or anyone else pushed him toward a certain destiny. He clenched his fists and, abruptly, declared, "There is no trap. This is my choice!"

To his astonishment and quick surge of relief, his cell widened, and one whorl of facets smoothed into a flat surface. He went forward and laid his palms flat against the section of wall, but it was unyielding. Discouraged, he remained there for a moment, eyeing the reflection of his hands and face in the translucent substance. His image looked back at him, a little wryly, somewhat baffled, still hopeful.

He was struck by the coincidence of his resolution and the change in his environment. He looked at the cell and willed it to open. When nothing happened, he swore, breaking off mid-curse as the wall blinked and splintered back into myriad facets.

Frowning, he scrutinized the fickle walls.

Then, deliberately, he took several deep breaths, closing his eyes and pretending he was elsewhere. After a moment he glanced around, and smiled widely as he saw a decrease in the chaos.

He forced himself to face his confinement, to accept its restrictions without anger or dismay. The cell grew, as did Han's relief and hope.

There was no such thing as imprisonment or loss of freedom, if one chose the course willingly. Han would take up where his father had left off and try to rid the galaxy of its dark master. Nothing else mattered. All freedom of choice would be lost if the Emperor continued to strengthen his stranglehold over worlds and all their inhabitants. All hope would disappear, and all beings, human or alien, would be submerged in bureaucratic monotony where only mediocrity and slavish adherence to a mold would be rewarded. Han Solo, who had pursued a life so independent that it could be termed lawless, would give up anything, including his love and his life, to avert the Emperor's dreams of total conquest.

His surroundings were changing. The planes were merging, one after the other, until Han was inside a cube, then a pyramid. Then the walls simply faded away into mist, which wreathed away on streams of air.

A sense of peace and pride in his new power slowly pervaded Han. He was still in the realm of the Force. He could feel its flow and intricate interweaving of energy as easily as he breathed. At this moment, all around him was featureless, white.

Han reached out with new senses and skills and created an image of Talwar Solo's favorite overlook in the skycity, an small courtyard ringed with trees and looking two hundred feet down into the lower parts of the domain. "Father?" he called with mind-voice.

A timeless instant later, he discerned his father's presence. Talwar Solo was walking toward him, clad in court finery, accented by his family's colors of red and gold. He appeared the same as he had in life: separate and self-confident, poised and relaxed, remote yet immersed in his surroundings. He was smiling. "Welcome."

The thought of being welcomed by a ghost was both funny and discomfiting. Han decided to act as if his father had never gone. "Thanks. I'm sorry I couldn't get home sooner, Father, but I'm ready now. Tell me what I need to know. Can Palpatine be killed?"

Talwar moved closer, scrutinizing his son with a proud smile. "Anything living can be sent from the domain of flesh to a realm of spirit and illusion, if that's what you mean. But he is powerful, swollen with the might of others. He is a Cadar of Annwin. He drained his family and those Cadar who trained him of all their power, likewise to countless Jedi. He seeks all Forceusers who yet remain hidden because he wishes to consume them all." He reached out and caressed the bole of one of the trees. "You are very strong, my son. I'm glad."

Han shrugged. "Sorry to press you, Father, but where is my Jedi armsmate? I was twelve years old the first time you told me that my life might be

tied up with somebody else's. Where is she?"

The elder Solo's features remained unchanged, but his son felt a wave of chagrin from him. "She does not exist. But--"

"Doesn't exist?" Han remembered Leia's hurt fury, his own pain. But they were as nothing compared to the tide of incomprehension, rage, and an overwhelming sense of betrayal that coursed through him now. "Doesn't exist?!"

Talwar Solo held up his hand commandingly, and his son swallowed down his agitation. Han leaned against the rampart of the courtyard and folded his arms over his chest. "You'd better explain."

"I saw long ago that a Cadar and Jedi could merge strength and defeat the Emperor," began the elder Corellian. "I felt that the male-female bond would be the most powerful, covering as it does the dualism of light and dark, good and evil. So I pledged you, my only child, to Anakin Skywalker's daughter. But Skywalker became Vader, and it took me many years--until the rebellion was underway, in fact--to discover whether he had sired any offspring. I found only one child. I believe you know him: Luke Skywalker."

"Know him?" Han paused to let the shock wash over him, then drawled, "Yeah, you might say that." Rapidly, Han told his father of his first encounter with Luke and their friendship. "Are you sure of what you're saying? Luke's got no brothers or sisters--but he sure as hell isn't Vader's son."

"No, he is Anakin Skywalker's son," insisted Talwar, as if this made all the difference necessary. "It's possible that neither of them knows of the other's existence. I wonder if the Force meant for you to meet the young Skywalker? Maybe there is still a chance."

Han was still struggling with the dichotomy of Vader/Skywalker to pay his father much attention. "But Vader knows about your deal with him. He knows your plans to defeat the Emperor."

"He knows me only as a stranger Cadar whom he met once in his youth. He does not know of you, or whether or not I yet exist, or what enemy may suddenly assail him and his Emperor. His ignorance is matched, unfortunately, by ours. I have no idea of his range of power or his schemes."

"He's after Luke," Han interposed. "He was gonna turn him over to the Emperor. But Luke got away from Vader." He told his father the little he knew of Luke's encounter with the Dark Lord on Bespin. "The kid's damn good, and the best friend I'll probably ever have. He rescued me from Jabba the Hutt."

"You must act soon," said Talwar. "Does Luke Skywalker wish the Emperor dead? Is he friend enough to join you in a perilous, potentially suicidal effort?"

"What are you talking about?"

"He is a Jedi. You are a Cadar, just now achieving your full power. Together you could meet and fight the Cadar and Jedi of the Dark--Palpatine and Vader."

"You mean instead of your original plan?"

"Yes."

For the moment Han said nothing, appalled by the waste and hurtfulness of ignorance. He could have been honest about his feelings to Leia long ago, if only he had known. He could have admitted to love...

Han scowled. No. No, that would have been even more cruel--and selfish. His chosen destiny would still have led him to desert Leia. If he died fighting Palpatine--which was entirely feasible--it was better that he be tied to no one. "Will it work?"

Talwar shrugged. "It might."

Han recognized that tone and response, since he'd used it so often himself. He used it whenever risky, probably unfeasible improvisation was called for...something that happened all too frequently to him. "Me and Luke against the top two tyrants of the galaxy," he commented skeptically.

"Do you have a better plan?"

"Not right now," Han admitted. "But even if I have to take on the Emperor bare-handed, I'll do it."

* * * * *

As Luke had found previously, time seemed to have little effect on Dagobah and its inhabitants. When he asked Master Yoda about this, the ancient being chuckled and informed him that time, like the Force, could be ally instead of master. So the work of months compressed into an unknown, unknowable number of rich daylights and full nighttimes--a paradox for Luke, who couldn't understand how Dagobah's sun and the planet themselves could be made to march to Yoda's conducting.

"The dance of the sun and the world have not changed," Yoda declared merrily, his ears twitching. "Our choice it is to join in that pattern, hmmmh?"

"I don't feel like it's my choice, no," answered Luke. He and Leia were sitting on a log after some exercises of illusion and concentration, while their teacher perched on a tree-limb some two meters above them.

"The Force is the Pattern-Master," said Yoda. "All things we perceive are seeming reality. Your bodies--a dance of particles, one fragment of a pattern in the Force, easily disrupted or changed. Time--a great music to order smaller patterns. But one wise in the Force need not follow only that music. Look at your memories, hmmm? Their own music of time and reality they make!"

"Maybe in eight hundred years I'll understand it too."

"Do not stop for reason. Just do."

"Just doing on Bespin brought me this," said the young Jedi despondently, raising his right hand and glaring at it. "I didn't stop to reason. I knew why I was fighting. What went wrong?"

"Vader was stronger," answered Leia gently. "And he had no compunctions against unfair battle."

Yoda nodded at Luke's inquiring glance. "Yes. You were not ready."

"How will I be ready next time--with a sword-hand that doesn't even respond to the Force?"

"Remember the question that I asked when first I touched your hand," said Yoda. "Your living hand carried your father's blood, part of his gift of life to you. But the replacement your father's legacy is also. Which calls out to you the loudest: his bequest of life or of pain?"

Luke cradled his right hand in his left and frowned at his mentor. "I don't understand. I hate this thing."

"If at peace with your father's deed you are, if life and the Force you truly feel, then your own flesh and blood you can heal."

Luke and Leia both stared at the ancient Jedi. "That's impossible," breathed Leia.

Even as Yoda opened his mouth to speak, Luke shook his head and muttered ruefully, "That's one of the things you're not supposed to say around here. Now we're gonna get a lecture."

Surprisingly, their master chortled. "No lecture, young ones: just a reminder to open eyes and ears and stretch belief. What said I before, hmmm? A pattern of energy your bodies are, nothing more. Life is for growing and changing. Control over yourself you must attain."

The young man looked down at his hand and slowly curled each finger toward his palm. If he concentrated, he could feel the metal and plastic joints moving, in machine perfection but without the warmth of life. "How?" he whispered. He remembered not to show his incredulity. "How could I get back my hand?"

"Make it grow. Your other hand you must study closely. The tiniest motes of it you must know. Then, begin in the Force to encourage cells to multiply and change. The body you have is the framework. Use it."

"Could you show me?" Luke asked shyly. "I see the concept, but--"

Master Yoda floated down to a spot on the ground just in front of the two humans. "Your left hand," he said soberly. As Luke extended it, he wrapped gnarled fingers around his wrist. He looked at both his apprentices. "Leia, touch your brother's hand. My thoughts will be open to you, if listen you can. Feel as the network of life I trace for you. Hmmm?"

"Uh--yes," said Luke, startled out of his concentration. Leia nodded silent, awed comprehension.

As the Jedi Master touched him with fingers and mind, the young man felt his awareness sink into the veins and capillaries, the muscles and tendons, the bones, even the cells of his hand. He lifted a finger and was supremely aware of the orchestration of impulse, nerve endings, brain, and muscle that

together created the tiny movement. Tentatively, he tried an experiment: the flow of blood into his little finger slowed. He backed off quickly, delighted at this widening of his inner world.

"Cut and bruised your skin is here," murmured Yoda, one finger gently touching a long scrape--acquired during tree-climbing--along the back of Luke's hand. "Feel and understand as I make the flesh whole again."

The only referent the young Jedi had was the fast, rough treatment of the bacta solution, which had felt to him like it was burrowing its way down to healthy skin. This was a gentle process from within, the blood slowing, antibodies moving away from the damaged region, cells slowly, liquidly healing themselves. Not a deep cut, it would have healed on its own in a matter of days; this was a renewal in seconds.

Luke exchanged glances of wondering excitement with Leia. "That's... that's beautiful," said Luke, his breath catching. "Thank you, Master Yoda. I don't know if I can do it, but I see it."

"I believe I could do it," said Leia softly, but with assurance. She turned questioning eyes on Yoda. "It's like birth. Isn't it?" The master nodded, smiling gently. She drew in a long, sighing breath, then pulled her hand away from Luke and visibly retreated into her own thoughts.

"I suppose I'd have to remove all the--the machinery," Luke commented, a hint of doubt and distaste creeping into his voice. He had been asleep during the most delicate part of the operation on his right wrist, the implanting of synthetic nerves, bones, and sensitive feedback motor circuits. He knew the theory--in fact, he was supposedly capable of repairing whatever might go wrong with the hand. Supposedly.

"Yes," replied the Jedi Master. "Life cannot emerge from non-life."

Luke told himself that it was just like fixing a problem on his X-wing, but winced at a sudden image of Artoo delicately pulling springs and coils out of his arm. "How much of my father is still alive?" he asked brusquely.

"I do not know."

"Why couldn't he be...cured this way?"

"A defiance and a rejection of life is the dark of the Force. To the light he would have to go, if healing he sought."

"Maybe he could," Luke ventured. Leia gave him an astonished glance, which he met with a quizzical gaze.

Yoda seemed to be listening to the Force. After a moment, he sorrowfully shook his head. "I fear that never would he leave the Emperor's service. Nor would the Dark Master allow him his freedom."

"How can we defeat the Emperor?" Leia asked bluntly. It was Luke's turn to give her a startled look, his mouth shaping the word 'we?' and his eyebrows arching in inquiry.

"By refusing to surrender, by withstanding his powers of evil and enslavement," Yoda replied peaceably. "No anger can you have, no thought of vengeance or righteousness. You must have strength and commitment to the purity of the Force."

"I don't suppose you could be a little more specific?" Luke asked wryly.

The Jedi Master sighed and shook his head. "No. Do not think me all-seeing, Luke. Your battle it is. All we can do is prepare and hope."

All was quiet. Leia looked around at the still, velvet-dark greenery, wondering now why she'd strayed away from Yoda's haven. Luke had disappeared some time before, right after dinner. She had felt impelled to follow him then, but hadn't wanted to infringe on his apparent need for privacy. Nevertheless, she found herself at the clearing where their ship sat on the bare bank of a pool. They'd rented the ship on Talisin, after convincing Lando and See-Threepio to take all the news on to Rieekan at the rebel rendezvous.

Luke was sitting on the ground by the side hatch of the craft, a toolkit and Artoo-Detoo in front of him. As she approached, Leia saw that he and the astro-droid were intently dismantling his bionic hand.

He glanced up quickly with faint dismay and hid his right hand when she was about ten feet away. "Leia. I didn't hear you coming."

"I didn't mean to startle you." She nodded toward his right arm. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

He smiled wryly. "Artoo's doing most of the work. Did you come looking for me for something?"

"Not really." She hesitated, then said honestly, "I don't mean to intrude, but I don't feel that we should be separated for long. Now, is that a manifestation of the Force or of an over-anxious imagination?"

He grinned. "Don't ask me; I'm just an apprentice here too. What are you feeling?"

She sat down on the ground, unmindful of her already stained uniform pants, and hugged her knees close to her chest. "Oh, lots of things. You, and--and Han, and even the Emperor and Vader, if that's possible. Is it?"

"Yes," he replied grimly, and told her of the cajoling, insistent voice in his mind during their escape from Bespin. "When he's far away I can't hear him. Ben was telling me that not only is it easy for Jedi to join in silent-speech, but that it's particularly easy for blood relations. That's why he worries that Vader's found out about you."

"It doesn't matter anymore," she said, faintly ironic weariness underlying her words. "Lord Vader obviously doesn't care about his children, except perhaps as a means to an end. We have to defeat him and the Emperor."

"You want to face him directly, don't you?"

"If we can ever get to him." She laughed self-consciously. "One of the recurring images I've had lately is meeting Palpatine face-to-face. Destiny? Fear? A wish long-unfulfilled? I don't know."

"We'll find out," Luke said confidently. "With the Force as our ally, we can pick out the best path and the surest strategy." He paused suddenly, looking rueful, and raised his right hand. "Before I win us the rebellion with my hyperbole, let's see if my Alliance with the Force is good enough to heal this hand."

"If you don't mind, I'd like to stay."

Luke looked down at his hand, then cast a dubious glance at Leia. "You sure you want to be around to watch?"

"Who do you think got you into the **Falcon's** med-unit?" she countered.

He looked abashed. "Right. Okay, Artoo, the tendons for the wrist next. Easy on the outer one--it's a little stiff."

The operation was slowest at the end, when blood flow had to be stopped at the wrist. They discovered this could be done through the Force. Leia helped the little droid peel away the last of the synthoskin, then caressed her brother's forearm.

"It's hard to focus," whispered Luke. He cupped his left hand around the stump of his right arm. He closed his eyes. Lines of concentration and pain deepened across his face.

By now attuned to movements in the force, Leia was aware of the swirl of energy that he brought to bear on the injury. Something was wrong, though--his arm was inanimate, unresponsive to the life-energy.

"There's nothing there--all I can feel is the saber..." Luke moaned softly. "It will never be whole again."

Leia interrupted, not letting her concern and fear reach her voice. "Calm down, Luke. Think about what Master Yoda showed us. Each cell contains the gene coding for your entire body. Feel the life in the Force."

He opened his eyes and looked at her, his eyes at first unseeing, then slowly filling with awareness and hope. "You're a good teacher," he said, in a half-successful attempt at a light tone. He drew in a deep, shaking breath. "I don't know whether I'm feeling what is or just imagining things. I feel Vader... There's so much of him that's not alive anymore. His right arm is a machine; part of his back, his heart--there's machinery and non-life throughout him, making him into some terrible kind of hybrid, half-alive and half-dead."

Luke's voice had become murmuring, softly hypnotic, his gaze fixed on unseen distances. Caught up in his near-trance, Leia felt no doubt whatsoever that her brother was seeing truth. "He was alive once," she whispered. "Think of Anakin Skywalker, not Darth Vader. Don't let him turn you into something more like himself!"

"Father of my flesh and master of my future..."

The words were barely audible. Abruptly, Luke shook himself as if dispelling an enchantment and stared at his sister with fierce intensity. "No. We have the right of choice, and the freedom to act. Help me, Leia, please. I can't do this alone."

"I know. I think we have to do this together." Her hands reached for his right arm and touched it gently, knowingly. She sensed the smooth strong flow of life and where it stopped. With a skill that seemed inborn, she gathered Forcepower, imbuing the flesh with it until each cell glowed with life. She heard Luke's startled indrawing of breath and felt him join his strength to hers, the two intertwining in a way that made concepts such as privacy, isolation, and loneliness into alien, unknowable ideas. They were indeed twins, rejoined at last.

With the two of them working together, the growth was miraculous. Like a tree sending out buds, like a manabar yearly sprouting horns, new flesh took shape. Luke closed his eyes. Leia felt his excitement, trepidation, and discomfiture all blending into a rout of emotions that threatened to disrupt both their concentration.

Time slipped away unnoticed. The two sat close, linked by flesh, blood, and the powerful, dancing tumult of the Force. The droid looked on, his photo-receptor slowly shifting color. Like a growing fetus, the regenerating hand, beginning as an irregular shape of flesh and cartilage, became starfish-shaped as fingers began to form. They lengthened. The skin of the palm began to take on a different tone and texture than the back of the hand. Cartilage formed into bone; undifferentiated tissue became muscle, tendon and nerve systems. Last of all appeared fingernails and the fine blond hair.

Leia knew that it was complete when a sense of harmony and balance returned to her brother's form. Exultant, near to tears of weariness and joy, she reached for and very gently took the hand, which seemed primordial in its soft newness. She lifted it and kissed the fingers briefly in a whisper-light touch; then she raised her gaze and looked into Luke's smiling, shining eyes.

"We did it," Luke said, his voice breaking in his delight. "You're so strong and sure, Leia... thank you. Thank you a thousand times. I can't believe it! I wish--I wish we could give that to our father."

Leia instinctively uttered a sound of shocked denial, then felt a surge of shame. "I envy you your capacity for mercy," she said. "Teach it to me, Luke, if you can. I fear the war--and my encounters with the Dark Lord of the Sith--have made me hard and unforgiving."

"You could never be cruel," protested Luke, gathering her hands in his. His own movement must have reminded him of the change, for he looked down at his hand and flexed it experimentally. The droid beeped interrogatively, and Luke glanced his way, grinning. "Looks good, doesn't it, Artoo? Thanks for your help." Artoo whistle-chirped shyly.

Becoming aware of how stiff she was, Leia stretched with lissome, Jedi training-enhanced grace. "Now I do believe in time distortion," she said. "We must've been sitting here unmoving for

hours and hours. How does it--your hand feel, Luke?"

"It'll take a while to recover full dexterity, but I'm already taking it for granted. What a difference! I can feel the flow of the Force." Luke looked up, his gaze and expression soberly intent. "I've never before been so close to anyone as I am to you right now. I can feel you; I can touch you in the Force without even trying. Now that you're my sister, I--"

He cut himself short. It was so obvious that he had thought better of what he was going to say that Leia laughed. "The end of your sentence couldn't have been that horrifying, could it?"

"It wasn't a very worthy thought," Luke admitted sheepishly. "But it's even more unworthy to keep the truth from you. Now that you're my sister ...I don't ever have to lose you."

Her smile faded as her mind provided her with an image of the one she had lost. She struggled to banish it, but the Corellian's face remained in her thoughts, his expression curiously enigmatic and challenging. She wondered where he was. Corell? Could Han Solo stay in one place, even his homeworld? Or was he, more likely, aflight again, seeking old haunts and new adventure?

"I never wanted to hurt you," she said haltingly, drawing up old feelings forced into burial deep in her memory. "From the time the two of you stood on the dais before me, waiting to receive the rebellion's small token of honor, I've been torn between you. Two friends, each of you so different, so full of things to share. Han pursued and goaded; you asked for nothing, providing me with one of the closest friendships I've ever known. For a time I was selfish, just taking what either of you offered and never giving anything back, afraid to show love, afraid to commit and to choose. I couldn't choose; I wanted you both."

"You don't have to tell me any of this, Leia," he interposed, sounding uncomfortable. "I never wanted you to choose. I just wanted to be your friend."

She had looked up, wide-eyed, at his interruption, but now she leaned forward, shaking her head. "But I want to tell you; I should tell you. I finally realized--just before we left the Falcon--that I had caused much of my own trouble merely by never admitting to my feelings! I didn't know how. Han knew that, somehow. He reached me...showed me a whole new range of sharing. I finally told Han that I loved him--just before he was frozen."

"I'm glad, Leia. Han's the best friend I ever had--and now there's nothing to break the three of us up."

"Except Han himself."

He looked astonished, then horrified. "What do you mean?"

Leia gathered all of her defenses and all the poise and command instilled in her by years of political conflict. "I don't know if he's coming back," she said flatly, remotely. "He doesn't love. He doesn't commit himself. He's governed by whim."



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He's gone away, and I hope neither you nor I ever see him again."

* * * * *

"--Not only is he too young, but he's also headswollen and cocksure. Acts without the least thought for consequences."

Han paused in the corridor outside the meeting hall. He had the indefinable conviction that the overheard words were meant for him: they sounded apt enough. He waited.

"You're not likely to gain many ears by that line of attack, Jard," said a woman's voice. "Tradition, romance, and sympathy are all ranged on his side."

"He has never cared for his homeworld. He shows his folly by throwing his weight in with the rebels!" sneered the first voice. "He cannot be trusted. His politics are of the most naive and he has never made a long-range plan or kept a commitment in his life. Not to mention the obvious fact that he has not been trained. Would you truly see him as lord of this family?"

Han took a stride forward and leaned casually against the doorframe, his hand draped near his weapon of choice. His gaze rested with roguish interest on the two Corellians standing about ten feet into the chamber. "You talkin' about me?"

The woman had the grace to wince and smile simultaneously, then dipped her head in deference. The other, the one named Jard, stared at Han with insolence bordering on contempt. "Yes."

Jard was perhaps ten years older than Han and a full ten inches taller. Redhaired, high-cheekboned, hawk-nosed--impressive and undeniably dangerous. After making his quick appraisal, Han asked easily, "Do you have an interest in leading this family, cousin, or are you just tryin' to make trouble?"

"I seek nothing but to establish the truth," said Jard haughtily.

"You're not doing too good a job of that," Han replied. He folded his arms across his chest and assumed a relaxed pose. "But by all means, do continue. If there're any details of my past you're not too sure about, feel free to ask."

The woman stifled a chuckle. Jard glanced at her wrathfully, then surveyed Han with a look that made the pilot itch to draw his blaster. The redhaired Cadar uttered a derisive sound, then wheeled and stalked away.

"Nice to know who one's enemies are," Han remarked. "How unsubtle."

The woman laughed outright. Looking at her, Han felt Talwar's memories rising, informing him that she was the master of the Shipmaker's Guild, Eris Solo. "Rarely have I seen Jard so easily routed," she said. "Nicely done."

"Kiri mentioned that Jard had styled himself my father's second, but I didn't expect him to be stupid about it." Han eyed his supporter somewhat skeptically. "Not to be ungrateful, but why do you

defend me--out of loyalty to my father or to dispute Jard's claim?"

Eris laughed. "Maybe because I had heard that you were the sort to ask such a blunt question. I'd have to say both are true. Also, Jard is a fool if he cannot see the wild strength in you--the potential for you to take on Talwar's rank--and more."

"Thanks for the confidence," Han said uneasily. "Frankly, I can perfectly well understand why some of my relatives might lack faith in me. It's not that I don't have a place in the Force, but--"

She eyed him with obvious anxiety. "Don't you want to be lord?"

He shrugged. "Not particularly. I don't know that I'm ready to take on the responsibilities. I've been a lot of things in the past--but never a leader."

"Talwar, and others, thought you were ready. I can remember him saying that your...varied career would give you flexibility, speed, and assurance in leadership."

Han was startled. He'd known that his parents had always hoped that he would take over guidance of the unruly Solo family and its multitudinous interests at the proper time, but he hadn't expected Talwar to go campaigning for him. "That's a very diplomatic interpretation," he said dryly. "I'm more used to being called an irresponsible, untrustworthy drifter. As Jard pointed out."

"Each member of the family will have to determine for himself what you've done and what you are." She gazed at him hopefully. "Would you be lord if the family asked you to?"

"Yes," said Han without hesitation. "If it happens, I'll give it my best. How's that for a backed-into-it commitment?"

Eris' mouth shaped into a warm smile. "It sounds more than good enough for me."

Han found himself smiling with rueful satisfaction as he walked down the corridor. He had suddenly acquired one obvious ally and one new enemy--and had managed to confront, for himself, the issue of family leadership. It meant settling down, giving up certain freedoms, but--hell--there were undoubtedly payoffs. He grinned at that materialistic thought. He could probably turn his 'business talents' to the family's profit; he didn't think they'd mind that at all.

The sun shone vividly through the arched windows lining the hallway and Han turned through the first exit doorway, thinking to enjoy the sun outside, in one of the large garden terraces. His reverie was shaken by a hostile vibration in the Force--and the realization that he could feel that disturbance.

"Good," said a voice to Han's left. "I was just going to have you paged."

Han swung around in a half crouch, and barely managed to stop his hand from drawing the blaster it

had already grasped. Jard laughed. "What's the matter? Nervous?"

Han straightened. "A person could get himself burned sneaking up on someone like that."

"Sneaking?" Jard feigned indignation. "It was you who interrupted us."

The tall redhead gestured around Han, who glanced to either side. He found himself surrounded by three others but recognized only one of them--Jard's consort. The woman nodded a deference, but the sneer on her lips belied its sincerity. Han didn't bother to acknowledge it. The others, both male, Han could only assume were family by their looks.

Han glared at Jard. "What do you want?"

Jard raised his head and stared down at Han condescendingly. "Before these witnesses I challenge you, Han, son of Talwar, for the right of succession to the lord's rank. Prove that you are the more worthy, or stand aside and acknowledge your better."

No one had ever said that taking on the leadership of this family would be easy. Han wasn't sure he wanted it, but he definitely didn't want to relinquish it to Jard. He nodded slowly and looked Jard directly in the eye. "I, Han, chosen heir of Talwar, lord of this kinhall, will defend my right and honor against any who challenge it. What are your terms?"

Jard smiled nastily and gestured toward Han's right hand. "Your preferred weapon is well known. But can you manage it as well in the Force?"

Han tried to appear nonchalant. "That's the real trick, isn't it? You sure you want to find out the hard way?"

"Tomorrow. Midday. You can reconsider overnight."

"Not likely, Jard. But you can have the rest of the day to practice if you need it." Han eased his blaster out of its holster. The others jumped to readiness, Jard's consort and one of her companions drawing weapons of their own. Jard tensed but made no move to respond in kind. Han took the weapon, barrel first, in his left hand and carefully removed the chargepack with his right. He tossed it to Jard, who fumbled the catch in his surprise. Then Han returned the weapon to its place. "Midday tomorrow," he said.

Before Jard could reply, Han turned away from him and strode out the doorway, back into the house.

The next morning, Han took a long shower, a cold one to enhance his awareness. Then he dressed in a simple, extremely formal, dark blue tunic and pants. In contrast to his flamboyant attire of the previous day, he looked downright somber. 'Proper,' was the way he saw it. 'All business. Family business.' For the first time in a long while he cursed his shaggy hair in the mirror and tugged disgustedly at a curl that insisted on sticking up at an odd angle. 'Leia would probably say it was

cute,' he thought.

A knock at the door made him start. He calmed himself and realized in the Force that his visitor was his mother. "Come on in," he called. "It's open."

Kiri entered, took one look at her son and shook her head. "Did you hear one word I said to you last night?"

"Of course I did, Mother. Did you?"

"Han, there are far more important things at stake here than your proving to some hothead that you're in charge. Call it off."

Han walked toward his mother and took her by the shoulders. He looked down at her and, as gently as he could, said, "I can't."

Kiri pulled free of his grasp. "Have you considered the--however unlikely--possibility that you might lose? Has it occurred to you that your mission to confront the Emperor is far more important than Jard Solo? Put him off until you've done what you came back to do. No one will question your place after you've dealt with Palpatine. If Jard even wounds you, it could destroy all our hopes..."

"Has it occurred to you that if I can't even beat one hotheaded cousin of mine I don't have any chance at all against the Emperor?"

With that, Kiri went white. Han gave her his best 'you see' half-smile and took her into his arms. "Call this a dry run. I'll be fine. Trust me."

"You sound too much like your father." Kiri took a deep breath, then looked up at her son. "The Force guide you, Lord Han."

"Thank you, Lady Kiri."

Han moved away from her. He went to the bed and picked up his holstered blaster. He wished it was the one he'd lost to Vader on Bespin, then chided himself for wishing the impossible. He might as well wish that Jard would break his leg or something. He belted on the holster, tied it down, then, in one move, drew the weapon, whirled around in a crouch and aimed it at his mother. They grinned at each other.

Han headed for the door. "You coming?"

"Wouldn't miss it for anything."

They walked through the corridors in silence. Those few they passed along the way hastily retreated--no one had been invited to gawk. Kiri would stand as arbiter. Jard's consort would no doubt attend as challenger's witness. Corellian honor and Force-sensitivity precluded the need for seconds. Treachery was unthinkable, and cowardice would be felt and dealt with by the entire Solo family.

Jard and his lady awaited them in the terrace garden. Han noted that the redhaired Cadar wore the family colors of red, black and gold--something he himself had specifically decided not to do. 'Well, he has to prove his point,' Han thought, 'I don't.'

Han left Kiri near the entryway and approached his cousin. "I gather you haven't changed your mind."

"I have not," Jard replied curtly. "You need only acknowledge me as your master in the Force to avoid this."

Han glanced over at Kiri and was relieved to find an angry, rather than hopeful, look on her face. Obviously she no longer wanted him to back down. "We went through all that yesterday."

Without another word, Jard turned away from Han and strode to the middle of the garden lawn. Han followed, stopping some twenty feet from his adversary. Jard's wife moved to stand with Kiri, well out of the way of any danger.

Both men stood still, facing one another, flexing fingers poised at gunhilt level. Kiri gave them a moment and, when she felt both were settled in the Force, she called, "Ready." Jard nodded once slowly. Han lifted his head self-confidently, knowing his mother would sense his reply.

"Now!"

In the instant that followed, the garden clearing exploded with light. Han drew his charge-empty blaster and, leveling it at Jard's chest, summoned up that same lightning Forcepower that had served him in the shadowland. He channeled the gold fire through the blaster shell, using the weapon's familiar guidance to aim his attack. The Forcefire had crossed half the distance to its target when Jard's blaster let loose its own blue burst of Force-channeled energy.

Han dropped his weapon and, with his arm still outstretched, summoned control over the hurtling lightning, dimming its brilliance so that its impact threw Jard to the ground, stunned, but alive. Han had but a split second to dodge the path of his challenger's assault. The blue radiance caught him in the right shoulder, burning through his sleeve and tearing into the flesh. It was to have been a killing bolt.

The two women ran to Jard, finding him semi-conscious. Han walked more slowly, staggering once. He knelt down beside his cousin. Ignoring the pain in his wounded shoulder, Han reached out his right hand and touched Jard's forehead. He summoned his recently awakened healing powers and soothed his victim's turmoil in the Force. Jard slowly opened his eyes. The two men stared at each other for a long moment.

"Why didn't you kill me?" Jard whispered. "You could have easily enough."

"So long as you know that, there was no need to demonstrate it." Han looked from Jard up to Kiri then back to the fallen man. "Do you have anything else to say?"

Jard lifted his head. "You could have killed me but didn't. If you can show that kind of judgment and consideration to me, then you would show it to others. I will support you as the new lord." He sank back, exhausted.

"Thank you," Han said soberly. "I can use your

help, if you're willing to cooperate." A wave of dizziness swept over him and he sat down hard on the ground next to Jard. Han looked at his right arm, which throbbed badly. Wincing, he said shakily, "Mother?"

Kiri came closer and knelt down beside him. She leaned his left side against her and carefully laid her hands on his wounded shoulder. He stiffened. She smiled and said lovingly, "Some things take a little longer to master than others. You never have learned to take care of yourself, have you?"

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The vision was black-winged, an ebon shadow with no discernible details. It hung in the air like a demonic nocturnal bird of prey. Thunder emanated from it, echoing in a fathomless space. "Why have you come?" it asked. "You are foolish to render yourselves up to me."

Two tiny sparks of light, one gold-white, the other gold-red, floated nearby, dancing in the wind of the shadow's making. "We know the truth, Father," spoke one in a young, untainted voice. "We have come to reclaim you from the Emperor."

The death-bird wheeled away and soared, scattering the light like sparks from a fire. "It is you who will be claimed by the Emperor's might!"

"You could help us defeat him. I know you want to be free of him. Become Anakin Skywalker again; renew the Force in yourself. We will help you."

"You are fools. The Emperor is invincible. I will take you to him now." The shape raised its wings and fell like a black hawk on the two glimmers of Force-light. The Force itself cried out. Abruptly, the scene was a whirl of color and disturbance that exploded into splintered chaos.

"Luke!" Han sat up with a start, reaching out blindly. His fingers scraped against a solid wall. He felt the bed underneath him and realized he'd been dreaming.

He shook his head and rubbed his eyes. His first coherent thought was that he hadn't felt a nightmare strong enough to wake him in years. Then he realized the vision had been no nightmare--it felt, smelled, and tasted of the Force. A warning that had chosen and shaped symbols from his own thoughts to carry its message.

"Hocus-pocus," muttered Han. "Big black birds terrorizing little sparks of light. Right." Even as he spoke, he slid out of bed, cursing as he landed on the cold floor with a smack of bare feet. He turned on a bedside light and reached for his pile of clothes, bypassing the semi-formals he'd worn lately and grabbing up a familiar pair of deep blue, red-striped pants.

Han had little difficulty in interpreting the basic import of the dream. It was time. "Pain in the ass," he grumbled. He didn't like being at the disposal of something neither tangible nor visible, that had the power of crawling into his mind and making him do things. Was this how Luke had felt, yanked to Bespin by Vader's brute summons?

He stepped to the door and pulled it open, only to be confronted by Kiri Solo in a nightrobe, her hand upraised as if about to knock for entrance. After an initial reaction of amused startlement, she said softly, "I felt your stirring. Are you leaving?"

He captured both of her hands and enveloped them between his. "I have to. It's sooner than I expected or wanted, but I have to go."

She looked up into his face, her gold-brown eyes filling with concern, sorrow, and hope. "I think you are stronger than Talwar," she whispered. "And if we are lucky, the Emperor will find your arrival a painful surprise. Good luck, my son."

Her bravery was infectious. "I just wish we'd had a little more time," replied Han, gently squeezing her hands and then letting them go. He bent his head and dropped a kiss on his mother's forehead. "I love you. And--well, I'll try to come back, that's all."

She smiled through welling tears. "I know you will. You'd...better go."

One fierce hug, and then he was alone again, striding down the hall without looking back. He was glad of the timing of the call, for at this late hour no one was up to witness or delay his departure. Time was the worst of the unknowns. No way for him to tell whether the vision was present or future; no way to know how little space he had in which to act.

He found a droid and ordered it to send a message ahead of him--to have a skiff ready for liftoff. When he reached the docks, a needle-nosed ship was waiting for him in the first bay. He got in and forced himself to sit still for a moment, until coolheaded resolve replaced adrenaline eagerness.

Han took off and maneuvered out of the docking bay. Emerging from the city, he lowered ship's interior/exterior lights to their dimmest glow, as all around him was a cloudless, jet night sky with no moons showing. Then he laughed in exultance and let out the throttle, piloting through the night by starshine and skill.

The starport was always busy, day or night. Han landed the skyskiff in a brightly lit hangar only a few hundred yards away from the **Falcon's** docking platform. He jumped out, told a servo-droid to return the ship to the Solo skycity, got one look at his starship and headed for her at a flat-out run. Someone was already aboard. A faint vibration underfoot told him that the engines had been revved for takeoff.

The main ramp yawned open invitingly. Han eyed it warily, then went up it in a surefooted, silent rush. His hand poised near his blaster, he looked around, felt the unmistakable imprint of the intruder who had preceded him into the ship, and called out incredulously, "Chewie?"

A roar from the cockpit adjured him to close her up and get moving, or else be left behind. Letting out a simultaneously indignant and relieved laugh, Han obeyed, then went forward and slid into

his seat in the cockpit just as the **Falcon** leaped skyward.

"What the hell are you doing here?" asked the Corellian with mock belligerence. "I thought somebody'd managed to break through our security system, and I wasn't sure I wanted to meet anyone who could do that."

"This morning I came to the port with Malla and Lumpawarrump," rumbled the Wookiee. "My cub is wishful of being a great star pilot. When evening came, I stayed behind, feeling that you would soon arrive."

"I'm glad you did," Han said warmly. He settled back and thought for a pleased moment about the way the Force had deepened their partnership. Wookiees lived in total, unquestioning harmony with the Force--their use of it depended on need and how strongly the patterns moved them. "I knew I had to move fast. I was afraid I was gonna have to leave alone, without even saying good-bye to you."

"What did you feel, Hearth-Brother? Where are we bound?"

No details as to the battle's location had been provided by the dream. He considered this for a moment, then used his common sense. "We're going to the Emperor's home planet," he declared. "We'll have to figure out the best route to Eternity that won't take us through half the Imperial fleet."

"What would prompt you to go so recklessly into the heart of evil?"

"'Cause the time's come for me to fight him." Han suddenly laughed. "Listen to me! Doesn't that sound incredibly righteous and arrogant? I had a Forc dream, Chewie. Luke and I--"

Han paused, realizing for the first time that he didn't know if the vision was present or future. If present, who stood with Luke? Leia? The thought was so appalling that he sat as if frozen, echoes of pain and danger thrumming through him.

"Rrooawurr?"

The Corellian blinked and sighed. "Sorry, Chewie. I got lost for a minute or two. Look, let's make the first hyperjump. Calculate for the Makuta system; it's as good a place to start as any."

The next few moments were filled with a well choreographed routine. Once the **Falcon** had hurled herself into hyperspace, the two partners relaxed.

Chewbacca turned large, blue, questioning eyes on his captain. Han described his dream exactly as it had unfolded, then added, "I figured that was Luke and me facing Vader, but it could have been Luke and Leia, I guess. I hope not. It looks like Luke and somebody willfully going into a trap. Luke must know the truth about Vader, and seems to believe he can withstand both the Dark Lord and his Master. The end of the vision doesn't seem to hold out much hope for the light, though."

"Then are you walking voluntarily to your death?"

"I hope not," Han replied with a short laugh. "But I've gotta go and help. I guess I'm a full-fledged rebel now, Chewie. I want to kill the Emperor. Nothing else matters anymore."

The **Millennium Falcon** came out of hyperspace as close to Eternity's sun as Han Solo dared take her. Then he and Chewie, confident that the sun's outpouring of radiation would hide them from sensors, sat tight in the ship and studied their target.

Eternity was ringed with ships, artificial satellites, sensor buoys, and junk of every description, mostly to keep intruders out and to protect His Majesty. The world was inhospitable to humans, its mean temperature just above freezing and its atmosphere barely breathable. It was extremely mountainous, and no one but a few highly trusted, highly paid Imperial officers knew the exact coordinates of the Emperor's stronghold. To date, none of the assassination attempts against Palpatine had even gotten near him.

"Looks pretty tough," commented Han, gesturing at a screen full of sensor readouts. "But at least we know the location of Palpatine's palace, since my father found it with the Force a long time ago. The only catch is--how the hell do we manage to land?"

Chewie emitted a terse bark. "If you attempt to fly through that blockade, I will step out the aft airlock right now."

"Do I look crazy?" He grinned as the Wookiee looked beseechingly upward. "Don't answer that. You think I can make this bird of ours invisible?"

"Invisible?"

"Wait--I got a better idea." Han stared out the front port for a moment, then said cautiously, "I think I can make us look like a meteorite--visually and on scanners. We'll take a cometary path and let gravity do the rest."

"And burn up on atmosphere entry," his copilot commented.

The Corellian made a gesture deploring such a poor-spirited response. "I like tricky landings. C'mon--we'd better move before portside starts to fry."

Having learned all about illusions while wandering through the Force realm, Han, with relative ease, created a Forcefield that echoed with mundane innocence to suspicious ships and snoopers. Letting Chewie take over the controls, Han maintained his concentration and tried to keep from firing ship's guns every time they came in range of an Imperial craft. The **Falcon** glided toward the planet on an elongated, fast parabola, and, as the navicomputer had calculated, was caught by Eternity's gravitational pull.

As they descended toward the surface, Han watched hull temperature readings rise, at first slowly, then rapidly. Chewie poured more power into the shields. At the last possible moment, Han let go of the Force-illusion, and began easing power into braking jets in quick, evenly spaced bursts. The vessel shuddered a little at the turbulence of

their plunge through the atmosphere, but began slowing gracefully. Han diverted almost all power away from main thrust and concentrated on losing speed without changing their trajectory.

"Planetfall in 1500 feet, at this angle of descent," Chewie growled. "Nothing but sharp peaks below."

"I'll find a place to set her down," Han promised. His gaze flicked from hull temperature to altitude to rate of descent to terrain readouts. He banked the **Falcon**, robbing her still further of her forward momentum. Now all he had to do was find fifty feet of flat land.

"Sensor satellite above us, tracking our course," commented the Wookiee.

"Damn it to hell and gone," muttered the Corellian. "Okay, if you want it that way--" The ship was now low enough where he could see the bleak, jagged terrain out the front viewport. He flew straight at a sheer rock-face, seemingly slid right up its surface, then banked sharply to nose between two stony teeth.

Chewie roared his pleasure and said succinctly, "Satellite destroyed."

"But it probably alerted all its friends. Let's land her. Good thing the terrain's so hostile--the Imps won't be able to find us."

The starcraft slipped gently between the walls of a deep black chasm and descended until she was just a few feet above the rocky floor. Finally, the Wookiee spotted what they were looking for--a yawning mouth under a ponderous overhang. The **Falcon** glided in and touched down gently. The two partners looked at each other with shared pride for a moment, then started shutting down ship's systems.

"How far is the stronghold?" asked Chewie, rising from his seat.

"Probably twenty miles, air distance."

"Twenty miles! It could take two days to go that distance in this country."

Han felt suddenly uncomfortable. "Not for me." He met his friend's intent gaze with a rueful grimace. "Would you mind stayin' here, pal? If this thing works, it'd be useful to have you and the **Falcon** standing ready for a quick getaway."

"And my presence would only prove a burden for you."

"I didn't say that," Han protested.

The Wookiee gave a deep, rumbling laugh and put his massive paws on the Corellian's shoulders. "Certain things I can feel in that life-river which you call the Force, Lone One. I would not stand in the way of your lifetime's commitment. I only wish that I could come to witness either the tragedy or the triumph...but I will feel it from here."

Flooding emotion made Han's eyes sting and his voice grow husky. "If unfriendlies come, don't fight unless it's a sure thing. Just get away from the ship, okay? I want you to survive." All his

fears broke on that thought, and he hugged the shaggy beast so fiercely that Chewie himself let out an astonished grunt. "Ah, damnitall, Chewie, I shouldn'ta brought you into this!"

"Why not? We will survive or die together." The Wookiee returned the embrace and rubbed his head against Han's as if the human was his own cub. "My love goes with you. I will await your return."

Solo didn't trust his voice, so he grinned shakily, crookedly up at Chewie and nodded a deep deference. Then he turned and strode out of the cockpit.

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The confrontation was audible but remained, maddeningly, beyond his reach. Just when Han felt nearest to the heart of the disturbance in the Force, the pathways of the palace became a maze. Every room had more than one door; every corridor bore dozens of branches. He doubled his pace and tried to fight off disorientation. Around him, either because of some acoustical accident or because the strife reverberated through the Force, Han could hear the conflict.

"Why do you fight me?" said a deep voice. Han recognized this voice as the Emperor's, rich and redolent with command. "I have no wish to hurt you. You and all of your rebel friends lash out and disobey like unschooled children. Why? You cannot win."

"That isn't true."

Han wasn't startled to hear Luke's voice. What did surprise him, and pleased him enormously, was his friend's resonance and strength in the Force. Luke continued with unhurried, unruffled clarity. "It is you who can't win, Your Highness. Your troops are deserting you; your worlds and your citizens constantly look for ways to combat you."

Palpatine's voice lost some of its melodiousness. "Ungrateful dissidents, boorish outlaws. You betray the order of my government!"

"Betrayal of an usurper's government is not treason," interposed a new voice. "You were the rebel who seized power, with little support other than a few mad backers, and enforced your rule with tyranny. We seek to reclaim the freedom of the old Republic, strengthened and renewed by the experience of our Alliance."

An uncontrollable shiver ran through Han at the sound. Leia was here, at the heart of darkness, at the core of malevolence. He saw her suddenly: a flicker of white flame, straight and tempered as a sword, trying to light the overmastering blackness.

He looked around himself desperately, trying to feel his way through the tortuous confusion. He was assailed by doubts which grew rapidly into fears. What could he hope to achieve here, with his unsure, just-wakened skills? He was already late to the battle. He should have had time to return to his friends and train with Luke for the fight. What was Leia doing here--was she prisoner, bait? His courage ran away in trickles of fear as he thought of her held captive by the Emperor. How could he hope to help either her or Luke?

"Rule is for the strongest." The Emperor sounded impatient. "But my servant did not bring you here to my throne for useless words and pitiful demonstrations. You will either acknowledge my power peaceably, or you will acknowledge it in pain and humiliation."

The Corellian struggled for control, finally winning freedom by focusing all his will on the choices and decisions he'd made. 'No one's forcing you to be here,' he told himself. 'No one expects you even to fight. Surprise is on your side, hot-shot. All you have to do is use it.'

"We have a choice for you," countered Luke. Though his voice wavered slightly, his aura was indomitable. "Stop the fleet. Meet with rebel leaders and planetary representatives, and agree to turn over rule to a democratic Republic."

"Or?" the Emperor interjected, mockingly.

"Or be destroyed."

Palpatine's laughter resounded, echoing. Nothing followed. The silence hung, growing into perceptible thickness. Han found this even more disquieting than the strife, and, without knowing why, began to run toward the silence. Suddenly, he heard a cry of denial, followed by mocking delight from the Emperor. Then he felt it: a strength-sapping hunger prowling in the Force, seeking to consume the life-energy of Luke and Leia.

Han was able to break free, as the concentration of will wasn't directed at him. In pulling away from the eddying focus, he abruptly realized that he'd been walking in a great spiral around the fight. He was going in the right direction, but it was doubtful he'd ever reach it in time. There had to be a way to bypass the maze.

Desire inspired innovation. Han knew that it must be possible to travel through the Force from one known point to another. Need surmounted ignorance and hesitation. He pulled all the images and memories of Luke and Leia to the forefront of his thoughts and willed himself to their side.

Han was aware of sensation before his form solidified in its new space. He felt himself at the heart of the domain of hatred and irrational violence. It reeked of putrefaction, of spilled blood and fear-sweat. An inaudible riot, a clamor in the Force of cries and harsh metallic sounds, echoed all around him. He could touch the evil, feel it slithering unpleasantly against his skin, seeking a way inside.

He had barely a chance to glimpse the scene in the dark, cavernous hall before it erupted all around him. The Emperor Palpatine stood a few feet in front of his carved-crystal throne, a short figure robed in a voluminous black cloak. Two paces behind him loomed Darth Vader. At the edge of the dais leading to the throne stood Luke and Leia, frozen in attitudes of shock and repulsion. The Emperor, with Vader's help, had already seized their minds in the Force. At sight of his friends, Han forgot all the pain of his last meeting with Leia, the awkwardness of his parting from her and Luke: he felt a blaze of vengeance, followed by an ice-cold vow to free them and annihilate anything that stood in his way.



Palpatine recoiled, startled, then swiftly loosed a bolt of blue fire from his fingertips at the interloper. Exultantly ready, grinning at this mirror of his passage in the Force, Han met the writhing fire with a golden burst of his own power. The Emperor's blow dissipated, and the ruler's rage and astonishment swelled and filled the chamber with storm. Han hurled another fireball, which tore at the black Cadar's defenses and weakened his web of evil.

Luke and Leia were prisoners, but not yet slaves to the master. Palpatine held them both, subduing all their efforts to withstand him by draining their strength into his. It was nigh-impossible for Jedi to battle a Cadar. One of the major tenets of the Jedi way was interlinked dependence in the Force. A Cadar, trained to the highest pitch of controlled selfhood, was usually able to prey on a Jedi's intrinsic openness.

Palpatine immediately renewed his trap. He reached out in the Force toward Han, threads that bound and threads that devoured snaking around the Corellian. Han almost welcomed this form of attack, having long experience of battling oppression and subjugation. He strengthened his shields until they glowed with impregnable independence.

Before his enemy could react, he plunged into the web that held his friends trapped. The unexpected attack was enough to bring Luke, but not Leia, free of the Emperor's clutches.

"Han!" Luke cried joyously. "Damn you, I always said you had the Force!"

Han grinned fleetingly at his friend. Since words were infinitely too clumsy to translate an image or a thought, he conveyed to Luke as best he could the barriers of mind and will that would fend off the Emperor's assault. Luke struggled to absorb the swift lesson. Before the young Jedi could act, Vader, impelled by an imperative command from his master, swept down, lightsaber upraised, on Luke. Luke was weaponless, but he used the Force itself to block the Sith Lord's stroke.

Han yearned to join Luke, to strike down Vader and then tell his friend all his hopes, his reasons for taking part in this fight. But Leia... He did not know how she had come here, how she had found a niche in the Force, but he would not forsake her to the Emperor's soul-quenching thirsts. He wavered for a split second in indecision, but even that was too long by the timeless standard of the Force. Leia would soon die. Luke could obviously hold his own against his dark sire. Han made his choice.

The Corellian Cadar hammered at the Emperor's defenses. Palpatine showed hesitation. For the first time in long years of mastery, a challenge had risen too fast and too strong for him to crush. He brought all his mind and vast energy to bear on Han.

The Corellian sensed that Palpatine had thought all Forceusers vanquished. Also, the Emperor had become convinced, by time and indolent routine, of his own omnipotence. Now he was filled with curiosity and trepidation.

Leia was deeply enmeshed, her aura surrounded by Palpatine's dark might. She struggled still, but her newly awakened talent was too weak to stave off

the honed powers of the overlord.

Han won through to the cage of power that held the princess captive. He was surprised by her prowess in the Force, but appalled that she had come to this battle so newly awakened, so hastily trained. Then the irony of his own lack of experience struck him, so he thrust aside all his questions and concerns. Time enough for questions if they survived.

Abruptly, Han pulled back his shields and allowed Palpatine's grasping will to seize him. The Emperor's mind loomed over his, burying him, drowning him. The world became a formless black cave, filled with jagged streaks of light that came from all directions, each a spear embedding itself in psyche and spirit. The Corellian fought desperately to maintain a tiny core of selfhood.

'Leia!' Han cried soundlessly. 'Where are you?'

He let himself be buffeted by the Emperor's will, seemingly surrendering to his enemy's domination. His soul, the diamond-hard core of his being that had refused to give in through the other perils of his life, sustained him now.

He could hear and feel nothing. He opened himself to the Force, almost choking on the shapeless horrors that inhabited Palpatine's inner domain. Finally, he sensed the tiny spark that was Leia drifting by, her strength all but extinguished.

She came near him, and he reached out in the Force to touch her. In the world outside, beyond this maelstrom, they must have just clasped hands. They clung to each other, a turmoil of their fears, hopes, needs and conflicts intertwining.

For a moment, Han became Leia, and Leia became Han, a perfect overlap of soul and spirit. Han knew a princess' passion, her wild hopes and pragmatic expectations, her poise, her naivete. He could feel her exploring all his bravado and self-assurance, his delight in life, his most guarded privacies. Or was that something he was feeling in her? The layers of overlapping emotion went deep and seemed inextricable and indistinguishable.

Han found himself searching for some hint of Leia's feelings about him, about others. He sank through the layers of her love and commitment, different for everyone and everything she knew: life, the rebellion, Luke--what was it about Luke? Han couldn't make out the source of her passion. And where was he in her heart? Seeking himself, Han only succeeded in magnifying his own feelings in their union; he could not discern her feelings for him. Suddenly ashamed by his invasion of her privacy, he let go his search. He felt a wave of anger and distress, then worry and confusion. Then, a sweet-terrifying, mad instant of denial swept over Han-Leia, a fear that drove them apart, back into their selves.

But that moment of shared wonder had wrought unimaginable change. Though Han and Leia were still caught by the Emperor's mind, they had drained power from him by their joining. Linked in the Force, they glowed with renewed energy and a mysterious, unshakeable awareness of joyous life. What was more, the Emperor was now as much trapped by them as they by him. The prey that the tyrant had so easily

captured was now a dangerous beast in too frail a prison. Han felt Palpatine groping, trying to marshal defenses and strength for another attack.

Han drew Leia closer to him. Though strengthened, she was still shaken and very doubtful of her own skills. He knew these things without even trying to think them; her emotions came as clearly to him as his own. Previously dismayed by her presence at the Emperor's throne, Han was now deeply glad of her vibrant spirit at his side.

Feeling the princess trying to convey something to him, he reached out toward her. Distantly, weakly, her needs came to him: 'What can we do? How do we defeat him?'

Han allowed his pleasure to course toward her. Even after torment and horror, she remained unafraid and focused on the job to be done. 'We strike,' he told her. He felt her worry for Luke rising, and he added quickly, 'Later. He is freed and fighting.'

Moving as one, they probed inward. The Force-realm around them changed. Han felt Leia's wonder as they walked into what appeared to be rainbows, prismatic bands of shimmering color intersecting and twisting, moving constantly around them. The air became misty yellow, subtle and evocative--and suddenly they were assaulted by a formless wave of decay and death, a surge of all the horrors associated with slow anguish and cruel murder. Stricken, Han and Leia were helpless. Han felt Talwar Solo die, and Jabba the Hutt laughed at a Corellian pirate's sickness. Then he relived the destruction of Alderaan--through Leia's feelings, and then through Palpatine's gloating memories of the shock and terror in the Force as that world of peace had been ripped apart.

Shaking with sickness and despair, dizzy with the deathly intoxication, Han felt the overlord furtively sucking at this new response, revitalizing himself on their dark emotions. Icy anger flooded the Cadar, and with that came a measure of freedom. He tried to move closer to Leia. She pulled away from him. 'Leia!' Han shouted. 'Fight him! He can't feed on a mind stronger than his. Join me!'

Blindly, she turned to him and let herself be surrounded by his arms. Beset by images of death and pain, they clung to each other, each wanting to give comfort and strength. They merged again in the Force. Enveloped in privacy, they shut out the Emperor's memories. 'Leia,' Han whispered through their union. 'Leia, help me. Join with me. He preys on feelings and weaknesses.'

Whether motivated by the demands of the moment or her own free will, Han couldn't tell. Leia glowed suddenly, brightly next to him, and their shared power grew. Excitement welled out of her, bringing with it a tide of hope. 'Then we'll give him a feeling worth remembering!'

The princess and Han both laughed as they felt the overlord quail. Sprays of color began breaking up the rainbow realm into a chaos of hues. Han flung forth power, recalling a hundred perilous, forbidden joyrides in a legion of different starcraft. That same sort of careless, glad strength flooded him now. Leia provided the slow, steady support for his attack, adding her unsundering dedication, warmth, and faith in life. Palpatine's

shields of cruelty and his aura of hunger and entrapment shuddered and weakened to bare existence.

Han was abruptly aware of a new presence surging toward them. After a moment of disbelief, he recognized it as Luke and Vader, somehow, impossibly, allied. Luke's thoughts came winging toward him, and Han felt a leap of delight and hope that sent pain shuddering through Palpatine's form. Father and son had found each other matched in the Force. After fruitless battle, Luke had convinced Vader to stop fighting and help in the Emperor's defeat. For whatever motives, the Sith Lord had acquiesced. Vader, for the first time in at least twenty years, was free to act on his own against his master. Han also read in Luke's thoughts an attachment to Leia, something to do with Vader--it made no sense to him and there was no time to pursue it.

Working together, the four were immune to the diseased images and dangers that surged around them in the Emperor's Forcedomain. They moved inward, seeking the core of the overlord's might. Around them all remained black and impenetrable by Force-sight, but they could feel Palpatine recoil from them, from their strength taken from his. He hid from his attackers, but he was unable to hide from them his bafflement and his fear. As never before in his long life, Urgoth Palpatine confronted a force that was neither afraid of him nor prey to his dominion.

Vader's triumphant contempt was palpable. Without waiting for concurrence, he leaped forward in the Force and sent a fiery bolt laden with hatred winging toward his erstwhile master's soul. The outer boundaries of Palpatine's aura shivered and disintegrated. The Emperor tried to flee--he gathered in all his remaining strength and attempted to slip into the Forcerealm. But Luke was too quick for him; the young Jedi drew a barrier of energy like a net around the dark Cadar.

Han made sure his bond to Leia was still strong, and then he reached out toward Luke and even Vader. A strange communion took place, blended with the Sith Lord's darkness, Luke's intensity, Leia's dedication, and Han's own flexibility.

A moment came when, without needing to speak, all of them felt the flow of the Force converge on their alliance against the overlord. They loosed a killing stroke--power reinforced with emotion ranging from compassion to cold commitment to vengeful fury. Palpatine's spirit broke on the emotional overload. A flood of ancient memories, thoughts and shreds of feeling washed over the foursome, breaking their alliance. But Han and Leia, still acting as one, followed up with a second blow comprising all their strength of soul-bonded, adamant will.

The Emperor shrieked his terror and tried to send out a burst of hatred as soul and ego disintegrated in a jumble of chaos. The Force reverberated with death. Han and Leia clasped hands. Luke took Leia's free hand, and the Sith Lord came to stand at Luke's side. Forcefire spread over Palpatine's form, becoming a blazing white flame visible even through his flesh. In seconds, it had consumed him utterly. A few streams of black smoke wreathed upward, reaching out like a snare toward the others, then faded away.

Han and Leia shared a surge of untainted joy.

Then weariness broke their bond in the Force. They stood just gazing at one another. Han smiled in welcome and opened his arms wide, moving to pull her to him. To his chagrin, she stepped back beyond his reach.

Luke clearly realized their discomfort. As though determined not to lose the triumph of the moment, he came to stand between them, happily putting one arm around each. Han returned his friend's hug, grateful for the closeness.

Only the Sith Lord stood apart. "He's gone," said Vader in a completely flat, featureless tone. Then he took a quick breath, and added on a note of savage jubilation, "And I am alive and free!"

"Father," began Luke. He looked at Vader, winced--obviously involuntarily--and swallowed hard. He declared with determination, "I'm grateful for your help. He was too strong...we couldn't have destroyed him without your added knowledge and power. Now will you come with us, so that we can help you?"

"I will thank you for your assistance in ridding the universe--and myself--of the Emperor's domination," Vader began, gratitude somehow lacking in his tone. "But just how do you expect to assist me?"

"Until your body can be healed of the ravages of the Dark, you will never truly be free. Master Yoda showed me how to restore--" Luke stopped abruptly, as though not wanting to bring up a distasteful subject, then went on more quietly. "The Force can be used to heal your wounds, to free you from that...that armor that you must wear. Come with us to Dagobah--if we can't do it alone, then surely Master Yoda can help us."

The massive, machine-perfect head slowly shook in denial. "Our place is here now, Luke."

"What do you mean?" Luke demanded. "Don't you understand? We can help you to return to your former self. You don't have to exist in the Emperor's incarnation of Darth Vader forever--you can be Anakin Skywalker again." Leia moved to Luke's side and took his arm as if to support his plea.

Vader's words held neither remorse for the past nor hope for the future. "The scars I bear are far beyond the single wound you healed in yourself, Luke. I am what I am. It does not matter now. The fleet, countless worlds, and a future history all await our command."

Luke shook his head. "The war'll be over soon, now that the Emperor's dead. The Rebel Alliance is strong enough to counter any last-minute Imperial strikes. And once the Imperial fleet sees that we want peace, it'll--"

"That's not what he's talking about," broke in Leia in a soft, steely voice. She had stiffened at Vader's words and now stood, staring at him with firmed jaw and stern-willed gaze. "Is it... Father?"

Han reeled as if struck. 'Father?' Vader's daughter. How was it possible? He looked from Vader to Leia to...Luke. Suddenly all he had felt when bonded with Leia made sense. He had sought a

lover's passion but what he had found was the unity of love between sister and brother. A thousand unanswerable questions flooded Han's mind. He forced them away as the magnitude of revelation overcame him. Vader's daughter--the Jedi's daughter. Together they had indeed fulfilled the life-dream of Talwar Solo. Han's attention was jarred back to the present conflict by the sound of Vader's voice.

The Dark Lord was looking at--his children; his gloved hands moved up and forward. "Join me, both of you," he intoned. "You could become heirs to all my might and skills. We are the last of the Jedi--and the first of a new Order. Whether Empire or Republic, the people of the galaxy will, as ever, need us."

"Need us for what?" asked Luke, his tone poignant with hurt and fear of disappointment. "If you mean to spread knowledge of the Force, yes. But actually, I think we need them--the people--more than they need us."

Vader's breath emerged in a hiss. "Don't you see? Have idealism and unrealistic causes blinded you? We three hold power enough to tame a universe! We have destroyed the Emperor, as was foreseen. We have captured his seat of power."

"And you're suggesting that you--that we--take the Emperor's place?" Leia asked in scathing tones.

"Why not?" Vader asked with imperious arrogance. "I will have preeminence as I know best how to rule. You both will become my heirs-in-waiting, wielding such authority as I delegate in, perhaps, some of the remoter sections of the galaxy."

Luke and Leia exchanged glances of baffled dismay. Abruptly, Leia made a sweeping gesture toward Han. "What about him--does he, too, have a place in your scheme of things? Doesn't he deserve some reward for helping to defeat Emperor Palpatine?"

Han flinched, filled with astonished pain at her manner of recognizing him. Had she misunderstood him in the closeness of their union during the fight with the Emperor--or had he? He was suddenly unsure of how she or Luke truly felt about Vader's appeal to power. All Han's self-confidence and control was shaken by the unreasoning fear that gripped him. His two dearest friends could accept the Sith Lord's offer, out of the purest possible intentions--to revive the spirit of the Jedi, to rule with joined wisdom, to bring strength and unity to the galaxy--and he could not join them, nor would he be able to stand in their way.

"What reward would you want, Solo?" asked Vader coldly. "Name your price."

Han stared at the threesome, not knowing how to respond. He cursed the irrational desire to request the one thing in the universe he most wanted at the moment--the love of one he feared despised him still. He said calmly, "You couldn't afford me."

"Oh? I think you underestimate the power and wealth which the Emperor can dispense, Solo."

"Just leave me out of your reckoning," Han replied. "I'm not part of anyone's plan." He was

almost sure he saw discouraged resignation in Leia's expression, another small sharp weapon to wound his will and strength. He stepped back as if to emphasize his disassociation.

Almost palpably, the Dark Lord dismissed the Corellian as being of no importance. His attention swung back to the others. "Luke. Leia. Both of you have proved your power. Now take your place with me, and we shall forge a reign in the Force that will renew the galaxy!"

Han reached out in the Force and touched Vader's strength. It was immeasurable. It was as if, through the link that bound them, the servant had sucked out all his dying master's powers. All of Vader's own Jedi skills were now augmented by Cadar powers. The Sith Lord now embodied that most powerful combination of Force talents, the selfhood and the all-sharing--only it was a selfhood of arrogance and a sharing of all things evil. Han could only wonder whether Vader knew how to wield his new gifts.

All of Vader's will was bent upon the two Jedi facing him. They were caught and assailed by an unvoiced tumult of promises and threats. Han could not intervene, not before his friends made their choice. If they willingly reached for the lure of mastery, he could not confront them. They were not like the Emperor, who had wrought and earned destruction. They were his friends. He would not challenge them, ever--he would sooner seek his own death. Like the Force itself, he waited.

Again, Luke and Leia exchanged glances, then drew close together and clasped hands. In the Force, they seemed to shimmer with a soft silver light.

"No," said Luke. So great a relief coursed through Han that he almost didn't catch the rest of Luke's reply. "We don't have the right to impose our rule on others."

"We don't want power," added Leia. "The objective of the rebellion is to gain independence and self-determination for all worlds and species."

A wind of wrath and outrage began to rise from the Dark Lord's aura. "Do you refuse the gifts the Force has offered you?"

"I think you're confusing mastery with conquest," declared Luke, his tone calm and unafraid. "I will teach the Force to others, but I don't wish to gain anything from that but self-mastery. Father...let go. Don't give in to the Emperor's tyranny, his hatred of life. You were your own master once!"

"And I choose to be master now," replied Vader. His regal arrogance was his shield; his fury, a weapon. His red saber sprang to life in his hands. The deadly light arced out. Leia leaped back; Luke faltered but managed to get out of the sword's path. With savage, lightning speed, Vader swung again at his defenseless son.

Revitalized by his friends' choice, Han lunged forward, and, exerting his will, called Vader's weapon to him. Surprise or distraction helped him. The blade flew out of the black-gloved hand and soared toward Han. The Sith Lord reached out his

weapon-hand, and the lightsaber froze in mid-air, trapped between them. Luke and Leia, astonished, stood poised, clearly unsure of how to act next in this unpredicted battle.

Vader's raging will surged against Han like flame and storm, but the saber remained still, testimony to stalemate. "You don't have the strength, Solo," snarled the dark Jedi. "However you learned your skills in the Force, they aren't great enough!"

Han hoped he was wrong. Maintaining his concentration, letting the Sith Lord's assault wash over his shields, he glanced from Luke to Leia. "Does he live or die?"

Luke stared at him as if at a stranger, then confessed quietly, "I don't want to kill my own father." Vader laughed; his son flinched.

When Han looked to Leia, all her attention was fixed on Vader. "You can't even consider peace, can you?" she asked. "The Emperor used you as a war machine, and that's all that's left of you. You must have been glad when the rebellion grew, because it meant new outlets for death and destruction. Now you can't stop. I pity you--and anyone else who becomes a pawn of war." She turned to Luke, her expression remote, introspective. "But I can't kill my own father either."

"Then you will all die," said Vader.

The Cadar opened himself to the Force and let it fill him. He reached up, called the red lightsaber to him, turned it off and tossed it to a startled Luke before Vader could marshal a counter-attack. Han felt the Dark Lord become rigid in astonished recognition of yet another who could challenge his might.

"Anakin Skywalker, you're a fool," said Han, speaking for his father, and for Luke and Leia, almost more than for himself. "You participate in the Emperor's downfall only to claim his power for yourself. You refuse the mercy offered to you. You, who once pledged yourself and your offspring to the destruction of evil."

For a fraction of a second, Han felt the darkness surrounding Vader give way to an eerie light, and an image of a young, grey-eyed Jedi in blue and white robes shimmered over the black lord. But then it was gone, as the dark malevolence forced aside the remnant of hope. However, Vader's voice held a tremor of indecision. "Who are you to speak of such things and call me by that name? You could not have been more than a child..."

Han nodded. "Yes, the child of a Cadar who entrusted his hopes for the universe to your honor and the fulfillment of that promise." He allowed himself to glance at Leia, who stared in bewilderment. He regretted that choice as Vader pounced on his moment of inattention. The Dark Lord reached out in the Force, trying to smother the Corellian. With an effort, Han shook him off. "The Cadar you encountered was my father, Talwar Solo. I'm here to carry out his pledge."

Vader let out a harsh breath. "I regret I did not kill you on Bespin, Solo. But Anakin Skywalker and your father are both dead. As dead as all of you will soon be." He turned from Han to again face

Luke and Leia. "You are the fools, not I. Your souls were stolen from me by the Jedi who raised you. So be it--go to them!" With that, the Dark Lord lifted his hand toward Luke, and the lightsaber, only casually held in his son's hand, sprang to fire and flew to Vader's waiting grasp.

As Vader moved again to strike at Luke and Leia, Han sent a flame of the Force darting toward him--more to divert his attention than anything else. As the dark Jedi swung toward him, the Corellian grinned--crookedly, savagely. "Me first, Lord Vader. I'm the one who wants to fight, not them!"

Vader uttered a sound of contempt and lunged at Han with the lightsaber. Han leaped with alacrity born of the Force, landing some ten feet away from Luke and Leia. The Sith Lord was taken by surprise. As Vader swerved toward Han, Leia sprang forward and hurled herself at him. She caught him from behind around the knees; his momentum sent his heavy torso surging toward Han. Vader crashed to the floor, his lightsaber skidding across the polished stone. Leia stood and drew back hastily, revulsion and horrified pity in her expression.

Han laughed for sheer perversity, bent over and picked up the lightsaber. "You seem to be having trouble holding onto this." He ignited the blade and drew an elegant curve through the air above the prone Jedi.

Vader rolled and rose to his feet. He moved awkwardly, as though he had injured himself, or perhaps damaged his breathing apparatus, in the fall. He tried to call the saber back to him but Han held it firm. "You have not won yet, Cadar." He spat the last word.

Han looked toward Luke and Leia. They were still defenseless, unready to fight. Well, then someone had to spell out the exigencies. It might as well be he. "If I let him live, he will only hunt you and seek power for the rest of his life," he declared brusquely. "He must die. I'm sorry." Leia nodded slowly. Luke closed his eyes, but Han read his assent in the Force.

Vader marshaled his power in the Force; Han could feel the energy in the room dividing between himself and the Sith Lord. Whatever weakness Vader had suffered in his fall was gone now. Han would have to find some way of surprising him--there seemed little doubt that Vader could meet his strongest attack.

Determinedly, Han turned off the lightsaber and, to everyone's amazement, tossed it back toward Vader. "Here, take your weapon. I have no use for it."

Vader seized the saber; it came to bright fire even as it touched his hand. He took two paces toward the Corellian and seemed to study him with calculated wariness. Han reached for his blaster and drew it forth slowly.

Vader laughed derisively. "Is your Force talent so poor that you still rely on that thing? It will serve you as ill now as it did when I captured you on Bespin."

"Things have changed," Han said dryly. Hefting the weapon, he thought of the chargepacks he'd left

sitting in a locker on the **Falcon**.

He could feel Vader probing at his strength, measuring his talent. Then the lightsaber swung forward, although ten feet separated the two opponents. Hate-filled energy blazed down the blade, lengthening it, surging out with impossible, frightening power and speed toward the Corellian. Luke and Leia both cried out their shock and dismay.

Han was staggered by the attack, a totally new blending of Jedi weaponry and the Emperor's Cadar Forcefire. Han sprang back, away from the Sith Lord's onrushing scarlet spear. At the same instant, he whipped his blaster up and loosed a great bolt of his own, golden fire.

Before the violent light had yet emerged from the barrel, Vader pulled the blaster to him, even as he had months before. This time, though, he also drew to himself the weight of Han Solo's Forcefire, the might of the Dark Lord's summons adding even greater fury to the lightning charge. If he had had any chance of warding off destruction it was lost in horror and astonishment. The golden fire burned through the black-robed giant and he crumbled in a wail of rage, agony, and hope unfulfilled.

Vader's final blow grazed past Han and dissipated even as its wielder died. Han, depleted, awash with pain from the casual brush of his foe's attack, sank to his knees.

Luke, who had cried out at the moment his father was struck, now stood staring, tears in his eyes, at the mass of charred blackness that lay before him. Leia, seemingly stunned, looked from Luke to Han. Then she moved to Luke's side and put her arms around his shoulders. They held each other tightly for a moment, then separated.

Letting go of the Force, Han smiled. It was over. Talwar Solo was avenged. A decades-old commitment had been fulfilled.

His peace was short-lived, however, for as he looked at Leia, he was reminded of promises made, broken and never-to-be. What painful irony lay in what he'd learned. Obviously the Force had its own methods for ensuring that certain events took place no matter how or why. He sighed. He'd be damned if he'd let a mystical energy field determine anyone's destiny now.

"Are you all right, Han?" Luke asked anxiously.

He looked up. Luke was impassive, but the lines around his mouth and under his eyes seemed deeper than ever. The princess' eyes were overly dark in a pale, exhaustion-shadowed face. "'Bout as all right as any of us," Han answered. His voice resounded oddly in the now-empty throne room. He started to get to his feet. Immediately, Luke and Leia were on either side of him, helping him up. He laughed shakily--he hadn't realized his weakness was that obvious--but the sound sent disturbing echoes reverberating around the three of them.

Leia glanced around nervously, her apprehension plain. "I think we'd better get out of here ...somehow. I--we don't know how well defended the palace is."

"I think the Emperor's guards would wait for

his command before coming back in here," responded Luke. "But we're gonna run into plenty the minute we walk out of this room."

"Don't have to walk," Han offered. "We can travel through the Force to the **Falcon**."

* * * * *

Han groped through the Force, trying to feel Chewie and his ship. It was harder than he'd expected. He'd never known true exhaustion--of the body, spirit, and mind--until now. Still, he knew the direction, and had a rough idea of the distance. Finally, after stumbling around as if blind in the Force, he felt his partner's distinctive warmth.

Han reached out to his two friends. Their contact felt so inherently right that he wondered how he could ever let go again. At first all he sensed was their shared weariness. Then, weakly at first, then growing strong and sure, rose the unquenchable, quicksilver tide of life in each of them.

Han focused on his hearth-brother, on the haven of his ship. Luke and Leia were an unfaltering unity--'brother and sister?' exclaimed Han's mind--behind him. The Corellian drew the three of them together, and leaped.

The Force was surging with chaos, teeming with energy unpatterned, out of control. The Emperor's and Vader's deaths had created great chasms in the life-flow, aggravated now by the deadly excitement of war. Before the three could be swept into it, a Wookiee's strength reached out and welcomed them back into the physical realm.

The three humans found themselves in varying ungraceful positions on the deck of the **Falcon**'s central bay, looking up at a jubilant, howling Chewbacca. Shaken by their trip, Han, Luke and Leia stared at each other dazedly, wonderingly. Then relief and release swept over them all and they began to laugh, wiping away some of their pain.

When their mirth subsided, Chewie helped Han to his feet and embraced him. "I am proud beyond belief," said the Wookiee. He moved to help the other two get up. "Welcome back. You all have succeeded at a task that many years of war could not achieve."

Han ducked his head in embarrassment at his partner's quiet sincerity. "We're not out of it yet." Slowly, he moved to the auxiliary command station and sat down in the high-backed chair. Weariness claimed him, as all at once his muscles and nerves began a clamor of aching discomfort. "Gods, I'm tired," he mumbled.

Luke and Leia sat down on the banquette. Luke leaned both elbows on the table and rested his chin in his hands, and even Leia allowed her shoulders to bow inward from the pressures of their ordeal, the full weight of which was only sinking in now.

Chewbacca uttered a tentative bark. Han lifted the right side of his mouth wryly and shook his head. The Wookiee must have understood their plight, for he rumbled his sympathy. Quiet slowly settled around them as tensions ebbed and battle-fire waned. But with the calm came separation and

loneliness, the ties that had bound the threesome dissipating as each retreated into private emotions.

Realizing he could fall into sleep without even trying, Han roused himself. "Everything all right here, Chewie?"

"Yes. One or two ships have crashed, but none near the **Falcon**."

"Huh?" The other two looked up as well, intrigued. Han went on, "What do you mean, 'one or two ships have crashed'?"

It was clear that the Wookiee was picking simple words so that Luke and Leia would be able to follow too. "There is a battle going on above the planet. When I last looked on long-range sensors, it seemed an even fight."

"Then part of the rebel fleet did make it here!" Leia said excitedly. "What's happening right now?"

Han turned and activated a couple of screens. Visual reception was impossible, since the **Falcon** was hidden deep in her cave, but he could pick up radar, the high-energy spectrum, and radio frequencies. He watched the readouts for a moment, then reported, "If you assume that the ships closest to the planet are the Imperials, then the Imperials are getting creamed. But there wasn't any space battle going on when we arrived."

"The Alliance decided it was time to make an all-out push," said Leia. "We realized that we had forces all over the galaxy willing to strike out at the Imperials. So Command decided to take the risk--including trying to attack Palpatine's hideout."

"Leia and I volunteered to face the Emperor directly," interjected Luke. "We turned ourselves over to Vader, and he took us to Palpatine--we figured the least we could do for the rebel assault was, on the level of the Force, to involve and distract its two biggest foes." He shook his head and grinned sheepishly. "I sure never expected what happened!"

"I wish we knew for sure how the battle was going," said the princess. "We also have to spread the news about the Emperor and...Vader. If the rebels are doing well, the Imperials might even surrender!"

Privately, Han thought not. He had a feeling that many of the Imps would fight even harder, to salvage their dwindling hopes. When the Emperor's death was discovered, there was likely to be a short, vicious interval of tumult and destruction prior to any resolution. "I'd like to oblige you by getting off this rock, Princess, but the **Falcon** doesn't have the kind of firepower needed to break the Imperial defense of the planet. We can't take off till things quiet down."

"Then I will bring out the wine," Chewbacca rumbled happily. "And some food. The three of you feel as frail as leaves in the wind." At Han's pleased nod, he noiselessly stalked out of the bay.

As soon as he left, the prevailing mood turned inexplicably awkward. It didn't seem to originate from any one of the threesome, for they exchanged

puzzled, disquieted glances. Almost hastily, Han offered into the silence, "I'm sorry about Vader."

Luke frowned and lowered his head. "He chose his own path," replied Leia. She spoke so stiffly and remotely that Han didn't dare bring up any of his questions about her relationship to Luke and the Sith Lord.

Luke leaned forward. "Han...what's a Cadar?"

The change in subject--so fast that Han recognized immediately how little Luke wanted to pursue the other topic--made him grimace. There were too many things that needed to be said and no easy ways of saying any of them. "Like a Jedi, only different."

"How long have you had the Force?" asked Leia in a tone that could be construed as accusing.

The Corellian felt like retorting with the same query, but he refrained. "As far as I'm concerned, a person's either got or not got the Force from the moment he's born. What matters is when you learn to use it, which for me was when I went back to Corell."

"Is that what you went back there for?" she continued.

Han was spared the necessity of answering that pointed inquiry as Chewie came in, two bottles tucked under one arm, a tray with glasses and food held in front of him. "Meat, cheese, and bread," said the Wookiee. "And one hundred and twenty-three year-old Kashyyk wine to celebrate."

Han whistled. "You must be feelin' good, to relinquish some of your prized vinejuice. Thanks." He got up and occupied himself with filling four glasses to the brim.

"If you can think of a reason for not feeling good, tell me," Chewie wuffed exultantly. "You are back, the Emperor is dead, you've avenged your father, and you've fulfilled a great quest."

The Corellian smiled, a trifle wryly. "Yeah." He raised his glass. "To peace."

Everyone concurred with that, only Leia adding softly, "To the new Republic."

They ate. Much of Han's weariness and lingering pain from the battle was replaced by new vigor. After a glass and a half of wine, contentment began to shove away the bleak mood that had been sitting on him--another leftover from the Emperor's and Vader's emotional barrage, he realized.

Between one mouthful and another, Luke inquired, "Han, how did Vader know your father?"

Startled, Han tried to sound casual. "They met once."

"And what was the pledge they made?" asked Leia.

"To kill the Emperor," Han replied. He tossed down the rest of his wine and decided there was no reason for him to feel sheepish. It was over, after all. "But they couldn't do it themselves, so they

pledged their children to the fight." He paused, wondering what Talwar would have said about the strange way his precognition had come true. Deliberately, glancing from Luke to Leia, he went on, "My father felt that the combined strengths of Cadar and Jedi, representing two such different outlooks on the Force, could best confront the Emperor."

They stared at him, then both began questions at the same moment. Luke laughed and gestured for Leia to go ahead. "How long have you known about this?" she asked.

With foreboding, Han recognized that voice as one he sometimes called her 'high-and-mightiness' voice. Lifting his chin a trifle, he replied, "For the last twenty years."

Even Luke made a sound of protest. Leia went on frostily, "And you couldn't at any point have told us? Didn't you trust us--even though we, Luke in particular, were the Jedi you were destined to go to battle with?"

"Hey, wait a minute!" Han stood up, facing them, and spread his hands wide. "I didn't know that. All I knew about was 'some Jedi.' I just found out on Corell that the Jedi my father met was Anakin Skywalker, the son of whom just happened to be a friend of mine!"

"Relax," said Luke uncomfortably. "It's just that--well--you didn't even want to acknowledge the Force when I first met you."

Han scowled, still feeling slightly defensive. "I don't like religion and I don't like people who try to inflate the Force into the most important thing in the universe. Maybe I was a little too sarcastic--"

"A little," agreed Luke.

--but Kenobi was being a little too pompous."

Leia interposed. "But you didn't tell us anything."

Han wished he could tell whether she was indignant, hurt, or merely detachedly curious. He stilled his restlessness and fixed them both with a defiant stare. "No, I didn't. I promised my father I wouldn't."

Silence followed this. Han regretted his harshness as soon as he heard it, so after a moment he said quietly, "I'm sorry. I'm also sorry I couldn't tell you."

"There are things we didn't tell you either," Luke said softly. He glanced at Leia. "And some things we didn't know till just recently." He laid his hand over Leia's as she began a protest. "You must've figured it out during our fight with Vader, but I think I'll feel a lot better for saying it. Leia's my sister. We're twins. Darth Vader used to be Anakin Skywalker."

Han nodded, then admitted, "That's why I didn't want to kill him. But better for me to do it than either of you, if you understand what I mean. You don't kill the person your life came from...but you don't have to love him either."

The princess raised her head quickly and looked at Han with eyes wide, expression unreadable, for a long moment. Somewhat warily, he waited for her to say something, but it was Luke who spoke. "Thank you for intervening, Han. I guess I was still hoping he'd change--if you hadn't been there, we'd've been killed or entrapped. The same holds true with the Emperor. I totally underestimated his power."

Han wriggled at this tribute, which he felt to be excessive. "The Emperor was a Cadar. You couldn't beat him, Luke. Neither could I, alone. It took all of us, Vader included--something nobody foresaw."

"The Emperor did," Luke replied with a short laugh. "He saw me and my father as threats. Vader tried to use that to induce me to join him in ruling the galaxy, way back on Bespin. Your appearance on the scene kinda took him by surprise."

The irony didn't escape Han. After thinking it through, he grinned crookedly. "It just shows that a person shouldn't rely on Forcesight and predestined paths," he commented. "Nobody can ever see all the angles to a given situation, and I guess that's where our freedom of choice lies. My father wanted the agreement to be between me and Skywalker's daughter--but he never found out that Skywalker had had a daughter. I thought the battle was up to me and Luke. Tangled, isn't it--but it all worked out, somehow."

Leia was poised, ready to spring. "What?"

Surprised, the Corellian looked at both brother and sister's astonished expressions. He tried to remember exactly how much detail of Talwar's plans he had relayed to Luke and Leia, and realized he'd probably omitted that seemingly trivial, damnably crucial point. "Well," he began, trying to find just the right, casual words, "my father originally hoped that the partnership would be a male-female one. A balance of two poles of power, he said, like Cadar and Jedi. It was just a hope, dropped in favor of me and Luke. It did turn out to be true during the fight--but that doesn't mean anything, 'cause it took all of us to defeat Palpatine. So it doesn't matter anymore."

"I don't quite follow you," said Leia, with commendable calm. Han didn't blame her, as he was feeling pretty disgusted with his own incoherence. "What do you mean by a 'male-female partnership'?"

The worst possible question for her to ask. Naturally, she seized on it immediately. Han avoided eye contact for the moment, glancing from an all-too-delighted Chewbacca to a wondering, bemused Luke. Then he picked the only possible route--directness. "A bond in the Force--a temporary one, of course," he added hastily. "It happened to us during the battle. The Emperor couldn't fight us when we were united, joined by purpose and uh--loyalty and affection."

"Loyalty and affection," she repeated, staring at him in rapt fascination. "Your father seems to have been a very insightful man indeed, to foresee that our...friendship would turn out so valuable in battle. It seems that destiny runs stronger than any of us knew."

"But that's not the way it happened!" the Corellian protested, indignant at the grin that was lurking at the corners of Luke's mouth. "It wasn't foreseen. If either of you think that I got involved in the rebellion and made friends with you just to further someone's idea of destiny--"

Han stopped before he could choke on his exasperation, then continued with more control but no less vehemence. "I made a choice. I wanted to confront the Emperor, and I happened to believe in my father's plans. They turned out sorta right, sorta wrong. That pact he made with Anakin Skywalker doesn't matter anymore. Nobody's bound by anything. Now I gotta go back to Corell, and you two have to go help finish up the fighting."

For the moment, no one said anything. As Han wheeled to return to his chair, a soft, deadly voice reached out to him. "Running again, Solo?"

Han stopped as if he'd been shot in the back. He pivoted slowly and stared at the princess. She surveyed him, bearing a regal air and a decidedly defiant tilt to her chin. Han half-whispered, "What're you talkin' about?"

"You know perfectly well what I'm talking about," she said impatiently.

"What am I supposed to be running from?" he asked belligerently.

"Your friends. The Alliance."

Luke stirred. "Leia--"

She silenced him with an abrupt gesture. "No, Luke, this time I want an answer! Why did you show up at the last possible moment, Han? For dramatic purpose?"

"Leia, he made it possible for all of us to defeat the Emperor!" Luke broke in indignantly. "You can't--"

"I know that--and I'm grateful--but that's not the point," she retorted. "How can you just do a job and then walk away as if nothing mattered?"

"Is that how you see it?" Han asked bitterly. "It seems to me I've heard this complaint before. Just what do you want from me, Your Worship?" Chewie issued a soft rumbling warning, but Han ignored it.

"Some sign of permanence!" she shot back. "I don't even know what you are--smuggler, rebel, pilot, Imperial officer, spicerunner, Cadar!"

He nodded. "That's right, yeah. You left out a coupla things, but that's what I am. So?"

"So when are you going to stop playing games with your life?"

"When are you going to stop tryin' to judge what I am?"

Luke rose abruptly and held up his hands. "That's enough," he said, firmly but gently. "I know your argument's none of my business, but don't you think you could maybe save it till sometime later? We just killed the Emperor and Vader, and

the biggest assault of the rebellion is underway right now!"

"Yeah, in more ways than one," Han said bitingly. "I'm going forward. We're takin' off as soon as it's clear up there." Despite a disparaging growl from Chewie, disappointment from Luke, and cold distaste from Leia, he strode out of the bay.

The wait was prolonged. Rest became restlessness as the **Falcon** continued to sit in her cave and the space battle raged on and on above the planet. The news went out--not coded, not on any special frequency, just blared across the radio spectrum and on hyperwave relay. The Emperor was dead at the hands of rebel assassins, ran the hysterical call, and every last loyal officer and stormtrooper was ordered to mobilize in defense of the Empire.

More ships came. Sensors identified some immense vessels which could only be Imperial Star Destroyers, ringed by hundreds of comparatively tiny attackers. The Alliance craft were winning, though slowly and with heavy losses. Some of the fighting spread to the planet's surface, as rebels tried to attack Palpatine's stronghold, and foes from downed ships engaged hand-to-hand.

Han sat alone in the cockpit. He'd opened up the extra cabin for Leia, pulled out the second bunk in his quarters for Luke, and shoved all of them, including Chewie, off to sleep while he took a first watch. He'd shut down everything but life-support and fuel feed--in case they needed a quick getaway--and now only a few ghostly telltales glowed on consoles and readouts.

The **Falcon** shuddered gently as a missile struck somewhere nearby--within ten miles, that is. Being attacked didn't worry the Corellian half so much as the enforced inactivity. He idly entertained the notion of taking the ship out, blasting whatever prey came too close, and then making a run for it. Ten years before, even five years, he might have done it without a thought for the consequences. He was much more cautious now, more aware of the limits of chance and skill. He also had passengers for whom he could not make that kind of decision. Sighing, he watched the energy-level readouts for distraction.

The confrontation with the two dark Force-masters had left him more dispirited and bereft of strength than he'd imagined possible. He couldn't even feel the Force, so faint were the patterns surrounding him. He'd been more than half ready for a fighting death, or a triumph that would wipe away the shadow of his father's fall and the rebels' long struggle. Instead, he felt empty, lifeless, purposeless.

Despite the pain that followed, his thoughts kept drifting back to Luke and Leia. They had gone through storm and grief and victory together, and instead of resting and taking comfort in one another's survival, they had dissolved their joining in questions and misunderstandings. Han wasn't even exactly sure how it had gone wrong--but it was all tangled up in the basic fact that neither he nor Leia knew how to approach the other anymore. She had turned into a Jedi, daughter of Darth Vader, and his long-ago foreseen but totally unexpected

partner. To her, his abrupt transformation into a Forceuser had to be equally difficult to accept. If only... Han pulled himself up short from completing such a self-pitying style of thought. Ignorance may have caused most of the trouble, but it was hardly an incurable condition.

He checked the chrono. His four-hour watch was long over. He rose, went aft, and entered his quarters noiselessly. Luke was sound asleep, his expression peaceful, one arm flung over the side of the bunk, and most of the light coversheet on the deck. Han grinned, then gently touched him on the right shoulder.

The young Jedi came awake instantly, alert but non-aggressive. Han, who'd once tried to take a shot at Luke upon being awakened after a particularly memorable carouse, relaxed infinitesimally. "Sorry to pull you out of dreamland, friend, but you volunteered for the second watch."

"So I did." Luke reached for the clothes folded next to his pillow and began pulling them on. He glanced up. "You okay, Han?"

The tone implied more than a simple inquiry, but Han ignored this. "Sure."

"Sure," Luke repeated. "Han--"

The Corellian steeled himself, expecting some helpful advice or even a condemnation of his 'discussion' with Leia. "What?"

"I never properly thanked you for saving me and Leia from the Emperor," Luke said gently. "You're quite something in the Force."

Feeling both guilty and foolish, Han tried to grin. He had a feeling it looked more like a grimace. "Thanks."

"Get some sleep, okay?"

Han nodded, shedding his jacket. As Luke left, he sat down on the edge of his bed and yanked off his boots. His gunbelt and holster came off next, to be hung on a special hook within quick reach of his bunk. About to remove his shirt, he paused, listening to the silence and thinking. Suddenly the thought of putting things off even one minute more was unbearable.

He stood up, all his muscles tensing automatically. Knowing it would be futile to try to relax, he strode out of his cabin and down the corridor. He stopped in front of the next hatch, hesitated, then knocked.

Her response was faster than he'd expected. "Yes?"

"I'd like to talk to you."

A few moments' pause. Then the door opened, and Leia, hastily dressed and with her hair down, looked out at him with unapproachable impassivity. "What do you want?"

Han's hands balled into fists; he uncurled them with an effort. "I want to apologize."

Her eyes widened, and her remoteness was

splintered by confusion and doubt. He continued soberly, "I didn't mean to get angry at you. I'm sorry."

Mutely, she stepped aside and beckoned for him to come in. He closed the hatch behind him and leaned on it, looking at her and wondering if she'd slept at all. The hollows under her cheekbones and the pallor of her skin were frightening.

"I didn't mean to sound as if I was judging you, either," she said, after a moment. "I know I don't have any right to do that."

She appeared sincere, but also stiff and uncomfortable. "Look, you don't have to apologize just because I did," he began. "I know you're not tryin' to judge me. You just don't know how to deal with me. Am I right?"

She looked startled by this direct approach. "To a certain extent," she agreed warily. She made a sideways motion with her hands and lifted her head to look at him squarely. "I don't know who you are. I don't think I've ever known."

"Why does it matter so much?"

"It just does. But I'm not trying to pry."

Han shrugged and smiled wryly. "So what do you want to know? Does it bother you that I've got the Force now?"

"Only that it was such a surprise." Her solemnity was broken by a tiny, fleeting smile. "You're the last person I would ever expect to turn into a Je--Forceuser."

"Cadar," he said helpfully.

"Whatever that may mean."

"It's just a word. A different viewpoint on the Force. The Cadar were totally unimportant and forgotten until the Emperor came along. For me, it's just another skill. I can't take it as seriously as Luke does."

"A twenty-year-old promise is pretty serious," she said skeptically.

"I never much thought about it. I knew the time would come, someday. Believe me, I never lost a minute's sleep over it."

Leia considered him, faint puzzlement in her features. "But you did make the promise, and you carried it through. What if it hadn't worked?"

Han settled his shoulders a little more comfortably against the hatch. "I would've died."

"I don't understand your equanimity...your lack of concern."

"For you, it's the rebellion, Princess. It's something that no hardship has any power over. Confronting the Emperor was something I had to do--and it didn't matter how long it took, or what I had to go through to try to achieve it."

"Selfless commitment to a cause," she murmured.

"Something you used to swear up and down held no meaning for you."

"It wasn't a cause," he protested. "I didn't like the bastard, and I wanted to kill him."

"Why do you keep refusing to take credit for the good things you've done? You take more pride in being a--a pirate and outlaw than all your other more reputable skills!"

"That still bothers you, doesn't it--the things I've been, I mean."

Leia gazed at him impassively, and then she reluctantly nodded. "I'm sorry. I just don't understand how you reconcile some of the things you've done--running spice and guns, breaking the laws whenever they get in your way. I know I don't have a right to question--I, a rebel and traitor. I just want to understand."

Han put his hands on his hips. He was momentarily perturbed at the absence of his blaster, then amused at this manifestation of a hard-to-break habit. "Somebody has to do those kinda things," he ventured, not knowing how to explain.

Her mouth pursed into a fleeting grimace of distaste. "But why you?"

"To learn," he said simply. "To do. I needed to find out why some people want spice so bad they'll kill and pay exorbitant prices for it. I didn't find out--but I learned to respect the need and desperation involved. I recognized that whatever the desire, there'll be a market, whether legal or not. It's not up to me to decide whether it should or shouldn't exist. Weapon-running--sometimes I did it just for the hell of it, sometimes I did it to give some people a chance to fight back. I don't like laws. They're just ways of judging people and sticking them into traps. Same goes for politics."

"But you're talking about anarchy, and a total lack of ethics!"

Han grinned. "Those are two of the kinder things I've ever been accused of. It's just independence, Your Highness, and neutrality, and taking care of one's own business. I'll do whatever needs to be done and I'll try not to tread on anyone's toes while doing it."

The princess seemed to be struggling to understand. "But...if you cherish independence, how could you not want to join the rebellion?"

"I can't join anything," Han said gently. "I'm neither rebel, nor Imperial, nor anything else. If people want government, it really doesn't matter to me what they end up with. It all boils down to putting yourself under someone else's ideas and authority."

"Not if you have a democracy," protested Leia. "People have the right to pick the government that's best for them, and fight for change if it doesn't work!"

He pushed himself away from the hatch and straightened, looking down on her in rueful

disagreement. "Well, the government that's best for me is a lack of one, Your Highness. That's how Corell runs. We argue a lot."

"I'm sure you do," she said, sounding half dazed but still game for battle. "Should everything be legal, then, as far as you're concerned? Murder, slavery, treason?"

"Not slavery," Han answered quickly. "Never. And how do you define treason? If you mean betrayal of trust or responsibility, that action is unfair to yourself and everyone else. Same goes for murder. Legality doesn't enter into it. It's deciding the necessities and values of a situation." At her puzzled look, he shrugged. "Maybe you'd better not try to figure it out, Princess. I'm not trying to tell anyone else how to act."

"I realize that." She seemed pensive, almost downcast.

Han was curious at Leia's quick change in mood, but as she was staring at the deck he could discern nothing. After a moment, the silence grew awkward, and he wondered whether his presence had suddenly become unnecessary. But he couldn't leave, not yet. Not until he'd finished what he had to say.

"Leia?" He was dismayed at how hesitant his voice sounded. She looked up. Her eyes were dark and velvet-soft, and Han felt his throat constrict suddenly. "I...also wanted to apologize for not telling you why I had to go to Corell. I didn't want to get you involved. And I'm sorry for the way I treated you that day."

She looked sad, even haunted. "But I am involved."

Han fought the impression that she was using the word quite differently than he had meant it. "I swear I didn't know you--or Luke--were part of--" He stopped and tried again. "I wouldn't impose anything on you, Princess. Ever."

"And just what are you afraid of imposing on me?"

"A stupid promise your father made to my father before you were even born," he said brusquely. "I accepted my father's Forcesight and his plans. But now that the Emperor's dead, there shouldn't be any obligations."

"Obligations?" Leia repeated blankly.

"I don't like knowing my personal life was predestined," growled the Corellian. "It's not fair. I feel like the Force is laughing at me, letting me think I've got freedom of choice and then working things out to its benefit. Well, I'm not going to let the Force use me anymore."

"Han, what are you talking about?"

He stopped and took a deep breath. It hadn't occurred to him that she could've missed his point. Then he realized that, while the ramifications had been troubling him for weeks, she had just today learned of the pertinent history. "The Force threw you, me, and Luke together," Han said angrily. "We got close. It turned out we were supposed to get close--especially you and me--the better to kill the

Emperor. I won't tolerate being set up that way."

"You think we became friends just because of the Force?" Leia asked incredulously.

"I don't know," he retorted. He said bluntly, "I thought I loved you, Leia. But I won't be manipulated, and I won't have you be maneuvered, either."

Her eyes went wide. After a moment of strained astonishment, she laughed shakily and whispered, "Don't you think that's carrying independence a step too far?"

It was his turn to feel thrown off-balance. "Huh?"

Leia advanced on Han, a determined set to her jaw and a martial light in her eyes. Apprehensive, Han stepped back against the hatch and wondered what he'd said. To his surprise, she took his hands and guided them to rest on her shoulders. Placing her hands on his hips, she looked up at him challengingly. "Kiss me."

Startled, he gazed down on her with curiosity and trepidation. She lifted her chin, her lips parting in welcome. He inhaled sharply at the quick rush of desire that he could not deny, then bent his head to hers. Her mouth was warm and sweet. His hands tightened on her shoulders, and he pulled her against him, every part of him crying out in unabated longing. Even as she responded, swiftly and strongly, he remembered himself and let her go.

The origin of the tremor that swept through them both could not be pinpointed. They stared at each other, Leia smiling tremulously, Han trying to slow his breathing and still his yearning. Then the princess asked soberly, "Do you love me?"

He hesitated. She shook her head and held him with her gaze. "Yes or no, Han. No complications."

He raised his hands to again take her by the shoulders. He gripped her tightly, but she remained steadfast, unflinching. As she always would. The Corellian lowered his head, took a deep breath. "Yes."

"And I love you." Leia stared up at him with such intensity of fearless conviction that he was shaken by awe. "By choice."

"Leia, are you sure--"

She let out a laugh blended with love and exasperation. "Three times is binding, Solo. First on Bespin, when I hardly knew what the word meant; the second on the **Falcon**, when I tried to hold you back with my need; the third time now, when I accept all that you are and all that you mean to me. I don't care what the Force had to do with our meeting. It doesn't take away my freedom to feel as I choose."

Han's arms tightened convulsively around her. He pulled her against him, burying his face in her hair, closing his eyes and surrendering to a flood of joy and wonder, shame and recrimination, hope and love. "I've been so afraid of hurting you," he murmured. "So afraid of intruding. I've always gone my own way; always had to go my own way. I didn't want to love you and I didn't want you to



love me. But I do--Force or no Force. Ah, Leia...I've been such a fool."

Without letting go of him, she pulled back, her eyes full of merriment. "Pigheaded, maybe," she said judiciously. "Self-centered, definitely, and secretive. But not a fool."

"Thanks," he said wryly.

"You're also honorable, trustworthy, loyal, open-minded, unpretentious, considerate...and gorgeous."

He grinned. "Nice men, huh?"

She laughed. "Nice scoundrel."

"You're so much better at this than I am, Leia," Han said with a sudden return to seriousness. "I've been fighting my feelings for so long I hardly know how to let them out. I think I've known since Hoth that I loved you--and so I tried to run. Didn't do me much good, did it? Leia... will you marry me?"

Leia accepted the quick change without so much as an eyeblink. "Yes. Gladly."

They stood quiet for a moment, holding hands and smiling warmly, almost ruefully at one another. "Will you come with me to Corell?" Han continued. "I'd like you to meet my family."

A trace of anxiety and conflict appeared in her expression. "When?"

"Right away. The sooner the better--as soon as we can get out of here."

"But I have to go back to--"

"Why?"

"Han, I can't just--"

"Don't give me any 'I can't' anything," he interrupted vehemently. "The Alliance will win with or without you there to tie up the last few loose ends. You've done more than anyone, Princess, and facing the Emperor was above and beyond your duty. Come with me...please."

"You had to see the Emperor defeated or die trying," answered Leia. "I have to see the new Republic established, Han. Once that's over, I'm free." As he frowned unhappily at her, she murmured, "My choice."

The Corellian squeezed her hands tightly. "Better you should belt me one, Your Highness, for getting possessive all of a sudden," he declared roughly. "I'm sorry. Your need comes first."

She gave him a small, three-cornered smile. "At the very least, you and Luke must be properly rewarded for your extreme sacrifice and valor in defeating the rebellion's two chief foes."

Han groaned. "Oh, no. Not me. That'll mean speeches, and being shown off to crowds, and getting paralysis of the face--"

"And free drink, food, and gifts," she said.

He stopped and looked at her skeptically, then ventured hopefully, "Monetary gifts?"

She stared at him, then gave way to delighted laughter. "Yes, you rogue. I have a feeling the Alliance would let you walk off with the Emperor's personal fortune, if you so desired."

"I'll keep that in mind," he said lightly, then pulled her toward him again. They clung to each other for a long interval, which was punctuated only by soft meaningless murmurs and breathless joy. Then Han drew back, and reached out to cup her face in his hands. "I love you," he said, in his deepest, softest voice. He kissed her forehead, then the bridge and tip of her nose. As she uttered a gurgle of laughter, he kissed her mouth and her chin. "You're so beautiful," he rumbled.

She raised her gaze to meet his. "You're prejudiced," she teased.

"A little," he admitted. "Hey, let's go tell Luke and Chewie. I want to share this."

"And wake poor Chewie out of a sound sleep?"

"It's for a good cause." He grasped her right hand and opened the hatch, then went through. Leia could barely keep up with his long strides.

Repeated hammering at the door to the Wookiee's quarters finally elicited a sleepy, irritated response. When Chewie opened the door, still commenting on the poor manners of certain Corellians, Han grinned widely at him and commanded. "Come forward, partner. The princess and I have some news for both you and Luke."

Chewie shook his maned head in befuddled surprise. "Are we taking off?"

"I don't know--it doesn't matter. C'mon." Han ignored the sustained growl that emanated from the Wookiee's throat and headed for the cockpit. Leia smiled sympathetically at Chewie, and the two of them followed.

Luke was engrossed in one of the computer screens when Han burst in. "On your toes, kid," said the Corellian jubilantly. "Surprise inspection."

Luke rose hastily, looking with puzzled, faintly amused wariness at Han, glancing briefly at Leia and the Wookiee. "I thought you were going to sleep."

"Found something better to do," Han replied, and grinned wickedly at Leia. To his astonished delight, she actually blushed. He put his arm around her and pulled her into the lee of his shoulder. "Leia and I are getting married."

The Wookiee roared out his pleasure. Luke nodded at them both, one side of his mouth lifting into a knowing smile. "What took you so long, hotshot?"

Simultaneously outraged and deflated, Han glared at the young Jedi. "Long?" he repeated. "I only showed up a couple of hours ago and you claim I took too long?"

"I've been waiting for you to do this--to do the honorable thing by the Princess--since Ord Mantell," said Luke.

Even Leia looked at Luke in surprise. "Since Ord Mantell? We had one of our worst fights there!" retorted Han.

"Yes, and the reason it was so bad," said Luke patiently, "is because of how deeply, and how fast, each of you had gotten involved. It wasn't my business to say anything or intervene, though, so I just stood back and hoped you two would work it out for the best."

"I'll be damned," said Han, with rueful admiration. "Then I shouldn't've been feeling jealous of you at all."

Luke raised his eyebrows in quizzical amusement at the word 'jealous.' "I sometimes wondered if you really felt that way. No, there was no need." He paused to bow deferentially to his sister. "While I fervently admired the Princess of Alderaan and joined the rebellion for her, I never--uh--"

"Lusted?" suggested the Corellian.

Chewie snorted his amusement. Luke and Leia both gave Han disparaging glances. "My emotions were on a higher plane," finished the Jedi in a lofty tone. Then he grinned. "Congratulations, you two. I'm delighted."

"And I, too, have been waiting for you to find a true mate." Chewie grabbed Han and enveloped him in a hug, then did the same to Leia, only much more gently. "Life and joy to you both," he said simply. "The next Life Day will be in your honor, Hearth-Brother, new Hearth-Sister."

Leia reached up and ruffled the fur at the Wookiee's neck. "Thank you. You know I don't want to disrupt in any way the bond between you and Han."

"You would never be a disruption, Princess," replied Chewie.

"When and where is the wedding going to happen?" asked Luke.

"Corell." Han glanced at Leia. "As soon as the war is over. Will you come and stand with us?"

"If you'll have me," Luke said hesitantly.

"Of course...brother-in-law." Han paused, then ventured diffidently, "You can tell me to put my ideas out an airlock, Luke, but if you've got no place you'd rather go, you can stay with us on Corell for as long as you want. The family's always willing to take in one or two more." From the pressure of Leia's arm around his waist, he could tell she was pleased by the suggestion.

The young Jedi looked astonished. "You can't mean that."

Han nodded, his expression completely serious. Leia added, "I'd like you to stay too, Luke."

Luke smiled and ducked his head. "I'd be honored. For one thing, I'd like to know more about the Cadar."

"So would I," Leia agreed strongly.

Brother and sister turned inquiring gazes to the Corellian, but he merely surveyed them blandly. "Plenty of time for that later," he said briskly. "What's going on topside, Luke?"

"Very little fighting anymore. A large number of ships landed by the palace a while ago."

"Well, battle or no battle, I'm tired of sitting here, and I feel ready to take on at least a Star Destroyer or two." Han took the controls, despite the bemused glances of his companions. "What are you guys waiting for? Let's see if we can get out of here and deliver all the good news."

* * * * *

"Do you really think you might be happy here, Princess?" Han asked hesitantly, as the two of them faced the crowd of waiting Corellians, Wookiees, and special guests. "Corell isn't Alderaan."

"I don't want Alderaan," she whispered. "Or Sith or Dagobah--or any of the places that are part of my heritage. My future is with you, Han Solo."

He put his arm around her and pulled her against him, letting his feelings--deeper than delight, stronger than love--flow out to her. "Our future," he amended, "together."

The room was spacious, part of a sequence of chambers that encircled the lowest level of the skycity, used for dances, business meetings, and any family gatherings. One long curving wall was all window, broken only by occasional struts, that let in the sky. For this gathering, space looked in; tonight, the skycity soared out of its usual orbit, becoming an immense ship that could, if desired, seek the stars.

They started to pick their way through the gathered people. Most were members of the Solo family and its business associates and friends, but there were people from all over Corell and beyond. Many more had wanted to come, but Han and Leia, tired of fanfare and endless crowds, had limited their friends' representation to a 'small' number. Most stayed back, content with watching and showing their wordless pleasure and approval. A few, closer by kinship or friendship to Han, came forward to wish the two well. Some called out their feelings--mostly just courteous wishes, but a few were both personal and pointed.

Han, never shy for himself, was made suddenly embarrassed on Leia's behalf. He scowled ferociously at those who commented frankly on their potential nuptial bliss and Han's past or rumored proclivities. "Just ignore them," he muttered to Leia.

She laughed and looked up at him with eyes that danced with amusement and mischief. "Why? I'm learning so much I never knew about you." As he uttered an exasperated growl, she asked, lightly but with an undertone of anxiety, "And you, Han? Are you sure you can be happy in one place, even your home?"

"No," he answered simply. "But I'll be perfectly glad to hide out here for a while. Princess,

if I'd known how people would react to whoever killed the Emperor, I just might have chickened out a long time ago. One more parade... It's all right for you and Luke 'cause it's good for the future of the Republic and the reestablishment of the Jedi Knights, but I can't take the publicity! How'm I ever gonna be able to go back to smuggling?"

"Exploit your new fame," she answered promptly. "The authorities won't dare stop you, because you've done such enormous service on behalf of the entire galaxy."

The Corellian stared at her, unable to tell whether she was teasing him. "I'll keep that in mind."

The war had ended about a month before. Most of the Imperial Starfleet had been only too happy to surrender with honor. Imperial civil servants, faced with rioting planetary populations, gave up, disappeared, or simply pretended they'd been rebel sympathizers all along.

As worlds reestablished some sort of order, delegates came to Alliance leaders with multiple problems and a plethora of ideas. Cooperative councils sprang up all over, but it would be long before any system of government could be reinstated. Most worlds, weary of oppression and a tyranny of law and order, were actually glad of the disarray and confusion that followed in the wake of war, and the Alliance provided what temporary structure and network was needed.

Han and Leia neared the front of the hall. There waited Kiri Solo, a few of Han's family who were closest to him, and a motley assortment of guests: Chewbacca, his mate and his cub, Luke Skywalker, Lando Calrissian, Wedge Antilles and several other fighter pilots, Kimm Rieekan, three former senators, one former smuggler, two defrocked Imperials, and two droids.

A space had been cleared in front of this small group of formal witnesses. The betrothed stopped there, clasped hands and bowed to the Lady Kiri, then grinned, with glee, pride, and defiance, at the rest.

Han's mother took a step forward. "If I can be so presumptuous as to speak for the family," she began with easy grace, "I'd like to welcome our guests. It seems that the rebellion and politics have, at last, come to Corell."

She paused to let a laugh rise from the audience, then turned her gaze to her son. "Han, you're of many more worlds than just this one, now. You've held more jobs and had more adventures than I could possibly begin to enumerate. You've fought for freedom and always made your own choices, and we'll not hold you back from whatever you desire to do. However, all those who cared to express a choice have asked that you take the leadership of this family, to act when group decisions need to be made. You have been recognized as the one who can best speak for our individual needs and collective desires, to guide us as Corell faces a time of change and growth. We'd be pleased if you'd accept

this responsibility."

Han turned and looked from a wondering Leia to a delighted audience. A few of them gave him a 'thumbs up' go-ahead sign, but many more individuals responded with the singularly Corellian, palm-up palm-down gesture that indicated freedom of choice. Han noticed his cousin Jard and his consort standing to one side of the assemblage. His one-time challenger smiled slightly and lifted his chin in assent. Han nodded. Then he glanced again at the princess, inquiringly.

She smiled and winked. "Each person has to find his own path, Han."

"That includes you, too," he retorted, in a low voice. "This choice is for both of us."

Leia laughed. "I'm a lot better prepared for this than I am for smuggling."

Han turned to his mother again and said simply, "We'll give it a try."

Han didn't get any further for the cheers and the sudden hug from Leia. He turned around and held up his hands. "Hey! This is not the point of this party, as far as I'm concerned. But you'll be glad to know that I'll have expert help from the former Senator Leia Organa, and I know I'll be working with Luke Skywalker on the relationship between Cadar and Jedi. I thank you for the vote of confidence, but right now the new job's going to have to take a back seat to me and the princess, okay?" Laughter and shouts of approval greeted this. He grinned crookedly at all of them, took Leia's hand again, and pivoted forward to face his mother.

"Han had never been known for his patience," said Kiri. "But in no way did I intend to overshadow his and Leia's bonding today; I merely thought to let him avoid another such public gathering." Amused agreement rose, with Han nodding his appreciation of her perceptive decision. "We're here to honor them today, to recognize their joint commitment, and to give them all the joy we can."

A strange feeling that Han recognized, with astonishment, as bashful anxiety began to trace a path through his nervous system. Still holding her hand, he faced Leia, smiling a little sheepishly. Though he had explained the ceremony to her, he couldn't help wondering how a princess of Alderaan would take to this very informal rite. Not that it was even a rite...just a public declaration of choice. "I'd like to share love and life with you, Leia," he said quietly, into a waiting stillness, "for as long as we can grow together."

The light picked out gleams of red in Leia's hair, which she had let fall loose around her shoulders, and flecks of gold danced in her dark eyes. "I would welcome the chance to share our lives," she replied gravely. "For so long as the Force be willing."

Han laughed ruefully. "For so long as the Force be willing." *

THE LAST WORD

Well, Anne, we warned you that you didn't know what you were getting into when you let us get our hands on your zine. Beware the Klingon invasion and all that...

It all started with a computer named Luke (he's dressed in black, carries a green lightsaber, er, screen, and is powered with the Force of Con Ed) with a twin printer named Leia (she's dressed in white, has a lot of words to say and has these two round things on either side of her head). And Anne needed some stuff typed. And we were in the mood. Not to mention a vested interest--we'd just given Anne "The Homecoming" (we'd promised her the next big project after Stormbrother--sorry, Anne, we're 1000 words short of a novel this time).

Computers are great. You can type about 30% faster into a computer-cum-word processor than you can on a typewriter; you don't have to worry about typos because you can always fix them; and, if you get bored with typing (or with what you're typing--no, no, never with TIME WARP!) you can take time out and ask for your biorhythm or play a game of "Space Invaders."

Ever since we got this thing we've been making idle comments about how much easier it would be to do a zine now. But having sworn off publishing many moons ago, it was much easier to

simply 'adopt' a zine to come out of the computer.

And Anne let us do all the fun parts--a little layout, a little organization, reading all the stuff beforehand, putting in our two cents (one each, of course) when we felt like it and still letting us say "it's not our job" when we didn't--while Anne did all the hard work parts--going back and forth with authors and artists to select and edit material, making all the hard decisions. (So what if we ended up doing a little more than a 'little' layout and organization...)

Besides, we were between books. Again. With Anne planning to put TIME WARP on the back burner to do some heavy-duty writing, we take this opportunity to welcome her to the brave new world of six-month publisher response waits and letters declaring that they "love the way you write but hate what you're writing about so please send more." Any bets on Anne's next fanfic or zine being done while she's procrastinating over whether to rewrite book one or finish book two or simply chuck them both and start book three?

So what are we going to do now without the twice-weekly paper drops and the every-Sunday status reports? Whither life after TIME WARP? We've got a couple of things up our four sleeves...

Fern Marder and Carol Walske



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